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## Experiential Career Exploration: Qualitative Examination of a Group-Based Intervention

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EXPERIENTIAL CAREER EXPLORATION:  
QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF A GROUP-BASED INTERVENTION

by

Rhanda B. Clow  
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1991  
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1996

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

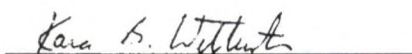
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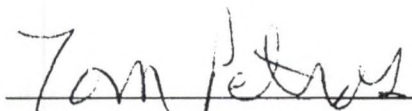
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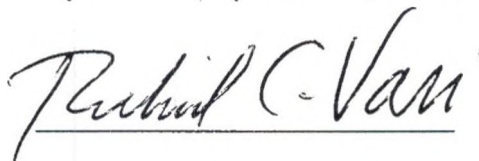
This dissertation, submitted by Rhanda B. Clow in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

  
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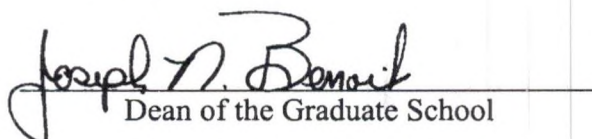








This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

  
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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the self-reported experience of vocationally stalled adults transitioning from welfare to work as reported on the Session Impact Scale and uses Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) to analyze their observed in-the-moment interactions in an experiential career preparation intervention. The analysis resulted in five domains, Affiliation, Barriers, New Knowledge, Isolated Noteworthy Events, and Negative Impacts, and 20 categories. Implications for the practice of career counseling as well as the training of those who work with transitioning assistance recipients and vocationally stalled adults are discussed. Suggestions for further research with this population in the context of career preparation are also discussed.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A colleague in an advanced career theories class once lamented, “Unfortunately, most traditional career counseling works best for those who need it least”. I could not agree with this sweeping generalization but I did agree that the individuals I had done career counseling with, those receiving social assistance and having difficulty planning forward, did not appear to make very good use of traditional career counseling. These vocationally stalled adults, as we might call them, include individuals who are expected to transition from public assistance to self-sufficiency, retired persons, displaced farm workers and housewives, and individuals who are chronically unemployed or under-employed, whatever the reason.

Since this project employs experiential methods, I think it is appropriate to set the flavor now by using a metaphor, an experiential application, to describe the dilemma faced by vocationally stalled adults and to describe how Project HOPE, an experiential career exploration group, can be successful at addressing it. The metaphor is that of an old-fashioned golf ball.

Just as the fluid-filled core of a golf ball is wound round with rubberband-like strands, this population often faces intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers that exist in addition to the day-to-day life barriers caused by their financial situation (McDonald, 2002). These barriers are wound on top of the common barriers to vocational satisfaction



encountered by others and effectively addressed through other career counseling theories and methods. These extra barriers, as my colleagues and I have determined in previous research (Juntunen, Cavett, Clow, & Suzen, 2000), as well as from our own experiences in working with this population, come from many sources that are inherent in the life of an individual who is unemployed/underemployed, probably with low to no income, possibly receiving public assistance, and definitely vocationally stalled and unsatisfied.

The common career barriers can include information gaps, such as:

- Lacking vocationally related self-knowledge (i.e. interests, values, skills)
- Lacking knowledge of the work world
- Lacking work related transferable skills
- Lacking knowledge of opportunities, i.e. financial aid

Extra barriers for this population can also occur in the form of thoughts, behaviors and emotions that are self-defeating, such as:

- Constrained thinking (reduced ability to think outside the box in problem-solving)
- Interpersonal problems (external locus of control, misattribution of authority or blame, communication issues)
- Self-deprecating thoughts/behaviors
- A form of institutionalization that results in inappropriate monitoring of personal boundaries
- Low self-efficacy, career-related self-efficacy in particular

Many of these barriers exist in a cyclical relationship to the problem (McDonald, 2002). They both feed and are fed by the vocational stall. The interactions of these

barriers, like the windings on the golf ball, lead to a seemingly inextricable knot of barriers that result in a vocational stall.

Many vocationally stalled individuals have become financially dependant on public assistance and/or the family. This can be a shameful, embarrassing situation (Juntunen et al, 2000). It is often a situation full of high maintenance expectations, regulations, requirements and sanctions that draw significant attention away from self-exploration and growth processes (Weinrach, 2003). Consistent with the golf ball metaphor, these extraneous pressures are similar to the tight vinyl covering that exerts pressure to hold the windings, or barriers, in place around the core. I believe that helping these individuals extricate themselves from their current situation involves creating a safe, accepting environment, free of the binding shame and blame, where they can experience themselves in new ways.

Experiential methods are powerful in producing change in many areas of people's lives. It has been said, "...experience, rather than understanding or insight, is the real impetus to meaningful change" (Connell, Mitten, & Bumberry, 1998). Insight, in fact, is often the consequence of the change that occurs when participants experience themselves trying and succeeding at new behaviors in a safe environment (Alexander & French et al., 1946). Experience transcends rationality and is a more powerful change process than cognitive understanding due to its purely subjective nature. Experiential methods allow people to interact with the world at a very personal level and in a way that is unique to the individual. Two different applications of experiential methods that are pertinent to this study include learning and therapy.



The experiential mechanisms of change present in both experiential learning and experiential therapy can best be explained by first examining the structures by which meaning is formed and how meaning relates to change both through learning and through therapy. Exploration of literature in both areas reveals that one common factor in both experiential learning (Luckner, & Nadler, 1997) and experiential therapy (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993; Greenberg, Elliot, & Lietaer, 1994) is the change that occurs through the emotional re-experiencing of the self in relation to the world. While it is reasonable to assume that the level of emotional involvement in the change process varies between learning and therapy, the key element shared by both experiential learning and experiential therapy is emotion (Greenberg, Elliot, & Lietaer, 1994). Other common factors shared by experiential learning and therapy include their utilization of the participant's on-going awareness of experience in the moment as the primary data. As such, both are oriented to discovery. Both hold the participant as expert of his/her experience and value their uniqueness. Potential for growth, self-determination, and choice are all fostered (Greenberg, Elliot, & Lietaer, 1994; Luckner, & Nadler, 1997). Both learning and therapy approaches see new awareness and the construction of new meaning as the basis of change (Greenberg, Elliot, & Lietaer, 1994).

There is a call within the experiential literature for the study of experiential change processes (Elliott, Watson, Goldman & Greenberg, 2004; Watson, 1992) as well as the roles of empathy and emotion in those change processes (Greenberg, Elliott, & Lietaer, 1994). The purpose of the present study is to explore the self-reported experience of participants in a career preparation group and analyze the observed in-the-moment events in an experiential career intervention that includes multiple opportunities for

participant change and the observation of change processes within an understudied population.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin my review of the literature with an eye to understanding some of the barriers to change faced by vocationally stalled adults, including the effect of societal oppression through stereotyping, and the impact of control deprivation on problem-solving ability. I then continue with an explanation of the experiential processes involved in change. I draw from emotion-based therapies, and theories that incorporate constructs that relate to the internal representation of emotion, and the environment and the self.

Along with a review of the literature, I provide an analysis of these occasionally redundant and at times very disparate theories. I discuss their uses, adaptations and effectiveness in approaches to various special populations and issues, and conclude with a synthesis that effectively points to their usefulness in a career-based setting that allows for safe self-exploration and reconstruction of a vocational self that can approach change.

The purpose and size of this paper precludes exploring all experiential approaches to either learning or therapy, i.e., my exploration of experiential therapy is limited to Process Experiential therapy, but my hope is to present those features that are most salient and that would easily lend themselves to effective career-based group work.

#### Barriers to Satisfying Employment

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (U.S. Congress, PL 104-193), which promised to “end welfare as we know it,” was signed into

law in 1996 making urgent the need to transition off of assistance. Despite enacting this law to move people from away from welfare and toward work, the underlying issues that interfere with assistance recipients' ability to attain work adequate to improve their economic well being have been inadequately addressed (Edwards, Rachal & Dixon, 1999).

### The Voices of Welfare Recipients

As discussed in Juntunen, Cavett, Clow, Rempel, Darrow, and Guilmino ( 2004), in previous research, we attempted to identify the needs of long-term recipients of social assistance who were approaching or making a transition into full-time employment. Four consistent themes that emerged in interviews with 6 welfare recipients in our region were self-efficacy, ambivalence about welfare assistance, and a cluster of logistical barriers (Juntunen, et al, 2000).

Issues of self-efficacy from multiple sources, including performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal were identified across the interviews. Self-efficacy affected personal as well as work life. Participants reflected on their concerns about their ability to survive on their own, without the social assistance "safety net". At the same time, they expressed strong desires to be independent and self-sufficient. Their fears that they would not be able to provide for themselves were exacerbated by their belief that the barriers they had already grown accustomed to encountering would continue to influence their abilities. Further, the welfare system, which many recipients reported made them feel "treated like children", sometimes served to reinforce the lack of self-efficacy of recipients.



Participants displayed ambivalence about being “in the system.” Many participants shared their desire to be independent, self-sufficient citizens. At the same time, however, they recognized that they currently needed assistance. Most expressed negative feelings related to the stereotypes that accompany the label of “welfare recipient”. They quickly differentiated themselves from unknown ‘others’ who were seen to be misusing or even cheating the system.

The ambivalence expressed by welfare recipients seemed to reflect internalized shame that reflected negative perceptions of themselves including feeling “like a loser” due to use of the system. In addition, the attitudes of others toward them contributed to the feelings of inadequacy and shame. Many of the recipients’ feelings related to the attitudes and behaviors of the professionals in the social service agencies that were charged with providing their services seemed to tie into earlier feelings of parental shaming. Participants expressed feelings about workers including, “it’s like scolding, like you are a child, like you are not a real individual”, and who referred to recipients as “people like you.” Many of the behaviors and statements of social service workers were hurtful and potentially impeded their development of self-efficacy and self-valuing beliefs.

In terms of logistical barriers identified in these interviews, participants noted several challenges encountered because they could not afford quality childcare, accessible and flexible transportation, health care, and secure housing.

#### Low Self-Efficacy

Assistance recipients’ fears that they will not be able to effectively solve the problem of providing for themselves without the heavy presence of authoritative

direction, it seems, may not be completely unfounded. Low self-efficacy is one documented barrier to effective engagement in metacognition, or assessing what you know and do not know (Schmidt & Ford, 2003). A lack of a sense of control over one's environment can also inhibit metacognition, which is critical to success in problem solving in situations where direction is lacking (Schmidt & Ford, 2003). Questioning behavior is directly indicative of a recognition of a lack of knowing, a metacognitive process (Ge, 2001).

Ge (2001) reported on the learning benefits of peer interactions, such as questioning, explaining, elaborating and providing feedback among peers. The study findings implied that, in order for learners to benefit fully from peer interactions, the peer interaction process itself needs to be supported through expert modeling, especially with novice learners in problem solving. It is reasonable to assume that a group environment wherein transitioning assistance recipients can observe peers and facilitators exercising metacognitive questioning in pursuit of solutions to unstructured life problems would facilitate learning, and help to increase self-efficacy.

#### Common Theory Basis

In this section I discuss several different theories that together form the common basis of human functioning as it is construed by the various experiential approaches to change. This basic understanding comes from humanistic theories such as Client-centered and Experiential and specific components of these, such as empathy and emotion.

Recent theories introduce the relationship between the cognitive schema, a mental representation that stores knowledge and understanding of the world, and its associated emotion scheme (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999; Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993). While a



cognitive schema is seen as a plan for action, the emotion scheme is understood as action-producing. Recent study in human life-span developmental psychology has emphasized the role of emotion in organizing all behavior, even controlled, intentional, cognitive events such as goal formation (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999). Most of the recent writings propose a mutually supportive relationship between cognition and emotion. Affect is seen as providing the motivation for behavior by prioritizing outcomes based on their importance to the actor in terms of desire.

The emotional scheme consists of contextually-based memories of our past responses to parallel events along with the emotional meaning we have made of those responses and consequently that context. These two functions of cognition and emotion work together moment by moment to form a new view of the self, the world, and the self-in-the-world as well as to classify the context in emotional terms (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993). Experiential approaches to change such as experiential learning and experiential therapy utilize this concept of the emotional scheme to varying degrees.

I have organized my discussion of both experiential learning and experiential therapy by providing separate sections within each for theory, practice, and research. I have then presented the career model formed from the synthesis and finally I apply that model to a case study from Project HOPE. The first discussion is of experiential learning.

### *Experiential Learning*

In 1995, the Association of Experiential Education defined experiential learning as learning by doing. The experience fosters changes in both behavior and mental associations (Omrod, 1990). These changes are likely to be more meaningful, longer lasting and more readily generalizable if a) the experience is personally meaningful, b)

the learner is an active participant, and c) the learner's reactions are appropriately processed. Experiential teaching, then, is the measured orchestration and careful, overt exploitation of meaningful experience to enhance and generalize learning (Luckner & Nadler, 1997).

### *Experiential Learning Theory*

Experiential learning involves a relatively permanent change in the knowledge or understanding base that is directly related to an experience. The steps involved in experiential learning are doing, critically reflecting, insight, and incorporating the new knowledge or understanding into the existing knowledge base (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). This is an extension of Piaget's concept of assimilation and accommodation. The first three steps are an analysis of the assimilation process and the fourth step is consistent with accommodation.

Experiential learning is facilitated by personal significance. The more personally relevant the experience and/or the knowledge is, the higher the likelihood that change in understanding, knowledge or behavior will occur (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Experiential learning affords a sense of ownership of the new knowledge.

Kolb (1984) suggested a circular process that 'begins' with a person initiating a particular action and then seeing the effect. The second step is recognizing these situational effects and being able to anticipate a similar outcome given the same situation and the same choice of action, an 'a-ha' experience. In this pattern the third step would be to understand the general principle under which the sequence operates. When the general principle is understood, the final step is its application through action in a new situation that falls within the range of the generalization (Atkinson & Murrell, 1988).



Burns and Gentry (1998) outlined a tension-to-learn theory, which they used to explain students' motivation to learn based on Kolb's (1984) theory. Kolb's theory, which allows for an "a-ha" experience, stops short of examining the substance of the "a-ha" in "felt" terms. The tension-to-learn theory proposes 5 stages of learning through experience. Those stages are a) current state, b) motivation, c) experience, d) legitimization, and e) new state. The stages of motivation and legitimization are added to the Kolb theory. Legitimization is seen as a "felt belief" and relates to the learner's value system by complimenting it. Burns and Gentry (1998) assert that optimal experiential learning involves intrinsic motivation and an internal felt belief in one's learning.

Doll (1989) proposed a state of dynamic tension that arises from the opposing conditions of a feeling of safety and a feeling of "disequilibrium". The disequilibrium referred to here accompanies a metacognitive process. It is the recognition of a discrepancy between what we think we know and some new knowledge that doesn't fit. Within the state of disequilibrium exist confusion and dissonance. These can only be effectively resolved through reorganization of the knowledge base, which allows balance or homeostasis to return. Whether you call this process learning or assimilation and accommodation, it is change. Experiential learning optimizes this state of dynamic tension by providing a safe environment in which to feel and resolve disequilibrium. This does not occur without discomfort, however.

Disequilibrium is anxiety provoking (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Our defense mechanisms become engaged to protect us from deeper feelings such as fear, inadequacy and embarrassment that may arise out of the dissonance. These defenses influence our choice of methods to attempt resolution, our coping mechanisms. When our defenses are



in full operation, we engage our typical coping mechanisms, avoid the anxiety, suppress the underlying emotions and maintain the status quo. No change occurs. Experiential learning employs strategies to circumvent the typical automatic responses and allow the disequilibrium to motivate change. This characteristic is explored in more detail in the discussion of the practice of experiential learning.

To summarize, experiential learning brings about a relatively permanent change that is directly related to an experience. The learning is facilitated by personal significance and affords a sense of ownership of the new knowledge. Experiential learning involves an 'a-ha' experience seen as a "felt belief" in the new knowledge. Dynamic tension that arises from the opposing conditions of a feeling of safety and a feeling of "disequilibrium provides the motivation for change. Experiential learning presents strategies to circumvent the typical automatic responses that interfere with growth and thus allow the disequilibrium to motivate change.

#### *Adult Learners*

To be effective, education needs to provide a connection between the new information and past experience; it needs to touch students at a deeper level. This type of engaged pedagogy allows teachers to engage students in the process of self-actualization. This engagement process works to allow students to express their struggle in the learning process and prevents the expert status and voice of the instructor from discouraging the students' sharing (Warren, 1998). These strategies of engaged teaching and learning are particularly important when working with adult learners, who have different educational needs than do younger learners.

Andragogy, indicating an educational approach specifically intended for adults, can be contrasted with pedagogy (paid- meaning 'child' and agogos meaning 'leading'), a term used in children's education (Davenport, 1993, p114). The term andragogy (andr- meaning 'man') was originally formulated by Alexander Kapp in 1833 (Nottingham Andragogy Group, 1983). In 1921, Rosenstock used the term andragogy to refer collectively to the special requirements that he argued were necessary for adult education. His assertion was that adult education, to be effective, needs special teachers, methods and philosophy (Nottingham Andragogy Group, 1983).

Traditional pedagogy is premised on assumptions about child learners that differ from the five central assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners presented by Malcolm Knowles (1984). I present Knowles' assumptions with some critiques of their appropriateness and usefulness for this population.

#### *Assumptions of Andragogy*

*Self-directed.* The first assumption of Knowles' (1984) is that the adult learner's self-concept has moved from being dependent to one of being a self-directed human being. This concept is culturally bound. It arises out of a North American value system about the self that is not reflective of all cultures.

*Accumulated experience and readiness to learn.* The second assumption is that the adult learner has accumulated a reservoir of experience that has become an increasing resource for learning. The third involves readiness to learn. As people mature, their readiness to learn becomes increasingly oriented to the developmental tasks of their social roles. Though I would disagree that this orientation differs from that of the child



learner, I would agree that the adult learner is likely more apt to look for means of applying the new knowledge to meeting the demands of their life roles.

*Problem centeredness.* The fourth assumption is that the orientation toward learning shifts from subject-centeredness to problem centeredness due to a time perspective change from the postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. This assumption is about 'teachable moments'. The relevance of the learning task becomes more salient in relation to its necessity in carrying out a particularly imminent life task.

*Internal motivation.* A fifth assumption was that the adult's motivation to learn is internal (Knowles, 1984). Within the population that is the target of this study, this is not an easy factor to address. Many of the participants in career programs designed to facilitate a transition off of welfare are 'mandated' to attend the program, or at least strongly encouraged, in the sense that participation becomes one of their obligations in receiving public assistance. That was true of many of the participants in the current study, as well. Their participation in this research was, of course, voluntary, but in a discussion of the internal versus external nature of the motivation to learn of the population at large, I believe financial need plays a confounding role. Their motivation to improve their career situation could be simultaneously internal and external.

### *Experiential Therapy Theory*

The Process-Experiential (PE) theory of therapy assumes that the client has some baseline psychological difficulties. Greenberg, Rice and Elliot (1993) outlined the PE model of change in a seven-phase process: relational bonding, empathic exploration, task initiation, evocation/arousal, experiential exploration, schema change or resolution, and

post-resolution/carrying forward. As I describe each of these phases, I provide a brief link to the group career-counseling model that I describe later in this paper. The career model is the basis for the activities of Project HOPE, from which the data for the present study was drawn.

*Relational Bonding.* The initial phase of the process involves “bonding” or establishing rapport and a working relationship between therapist and client. This includes the necessary if not sufficient genuineness and prizing of a client-centered approach as well as accurate empathy.

Warner (1997) stated that phenomenological empathy, empathy that reflects the client’s own understanding of his/her experience versus an empathy more often used in psychodynamic or self psychology that adds something to the client’s experience, has the potential to bring about both immediate and lasting change. One way that phenomenological empathy promotes change is by encouraging the client to engage in positive processing of the experience. This, as Warner (1997) points out, is with the assumption that the other Rogerian necessary and sufficient conditions of genuineness and prizing are also present.

Warner (1997) further suggests that the corrective emotional experience of being consistently prized while being accurately “seen” is a sufficient challenge to a preformed negative self-image to bring about lasting change. The idea of the corrective emotional experience is that you re-experience the problem relationships with the therapist and solve them. Other important change components of the experience of recognition are the feeling of connection and the heightened awareness of internal, unconscious aspects of the experience. Warner sees this feeling of recognition in a safe, trustworthy environment



as being accompanied by a sense of “release or relief”. In sum, sharing the experience in the presence of accurate empathy can be a powerful change mechanism.

Within the relational bonding phase a collaborative approach to goals is agreed upon. The client must also see the relevance of the approach to those goals. This is roughly equitable to the initial storytelling phase in the following career group model, during which group members become more familiar with one another and begin to establish relationships.

*Empathic exploration.* The second phase is the Empathic Exploration phase, wherein empathic reflecting is employed to convey understanding while the client examines his/her emotional schemes and the related experiences at a level that allows unexamined experiences to emerge. As new experiences occur, the automatic reactions that each trigger are consciously acknowledged and examined for their relationship to the underlying emotional scheme. This sets the stage for change to begin. In the career group, leaders begin to establish rapport with participants by empathically honoring their story and beginning to help them explore their life situation in its current state.

*Task initiation.* This is the phase during which task markers are first noted. A task marker is a theoretical construct representing an event in therapy that is selected by the therapist for intervention. The event is seen as signaling an underlying problem in the emotional scheme and a readiness to approach examination of the problem.

A task marker indicates the therapist’s awareness of a particular focus or type of engagement that the client is exhibiting in content, manner of expression, and processing style. These are often conveyed through non-verbal expression such as tone of voice, pace of speech, facial expression and body language. An example might be a client’s

expression of a self-interruptive split, a moment when the client expresses a feeling of being both actor and victim when over-controlling their own experience or expression of emotion. The client says, "I kick myself" and exhibits tension or breath-holding while describing something s/he is feeling. Upon questioning, the client reports feeling helpless or passive.

In PE therapy certain types of markers signal certain types of problems that call for corresponding interventions. When the therapist has identified that a marker exists and reflected its existence to the client, the therapist must confirm the client's perception of the problem, and suggest the intervention.

For career exploration this phase might involve the exploration of "career dreams" and then recognizing that dissonance exists between dream and perceived reality or between desire to approach goals and desire to avoid the pain of rejection or failure, often an outcome expectation due to low self-efficacy. This is the beginning of identifying barriers to career-related goals and dreams.

*Evocation/arousal.* The next phase, Evocation/Arousal, involves the enhanced experiencing of the problem. This is brought about by the various therapeutic interventions. This process brings the emotion scheme into a more active state of exposure and makes it more open to change. When resistance in the form of embarrassment or self-criticism is encountered and threatens to weaken the client's arousal, the therapist helps the client to acknowledge the interruption and quickly move beyond it to remain focused. In a career-based group approach, the interventions that would serve to facilitate the arousal might include role-plays, ropes course tasks,



problem-solving exercises, etc. Guidelines for dealing with resistance would be similar to those in PE therapy.

*Experiential exploration.* The next phase utilizes the existing arousal to help clients' access, recognize and closely examine their emotional schemes. Within this phase clients are encouraged to attend closely to their immediate, automatic physical and emotional reactions to the experience and begin to recognize patterns in responding. If successful, the client arrives at a moment of recognition followed by a feeling of ownership of the response pattern. This is roughly equitable to a synthesis of the "a-ha" experience of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and the "felt belief" of the legitimization stage of Burns and Gentry's (1998) tension-to-learn theory. Once clients are able to recognize that they have been responding automatically either without regard to information other than cognition or from a dysfunctional emotion scheme, they are able to separate out their true experience in the moment.

This phase within a career group such as Project HOPE would involve the clients' recognition of their under-estimation of their ability to overcome or adjust for the barriers to their career dreams. It would also involve the construction of the new knowledge that they are capable of the level of problem-solving necessary to be successful at planning for a career.

*Scheme Change or Resolution.* From the awareness of their true experience in the moment, clients begin to form new knowledge of themselves or others. This new knowledge construction is fueled by a growth in understanding related to who they are and how they fit with the world. This ownership and understanding leads to greater self-acceptance. These processes are empowering. Clients feel empowered to choose new



behaviors, ideas, values, etc. However, the nature of the eventual change(s) is unpredictable.

In a career-based group setting, this phase involves a broader recognition of an increased self-efficacy that impacts overall self-esteem. They begin to see themselves not only as capable but also as worthy of the dream. This leads to a reconfiguration of behaviors, ideas, and values that is exhibited in self-preserving behaviors such as increased self-care and tightening of personal boundaries.

*Postresolution or carrying-forward.* Within this final phase clients explore the potential impact of the change on themselves and their relationships with others. They plan for activation of the change in real world situations and attempt to anticipate outcomes. This is equitable to the processing that is so crucial to successful change through adventure training and experiential learning (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). This phase sets up the generalization of the new knowledge (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993; Paivio, 1999).

Participants in an experiential career exploration group exhibit planning behavior that results in an exit plan which includes goals and objectives for reaching the career dream.

### *Experiential Therapy Research*

Process-Experiential (PE) psychotherapy differs from Client-centered psychotherapy in that it adds a dimension of active interventions taken from Gestalt Psychotherapy. PE is based on the same three necessary conditions of Client-centered psychotherapy, those of congruence, genuineness and unconditional positive regard (Greenberg and Watson, 1998).

Process-Experiential psychotherapy interventions have been associated with improved self-esteem, a reduction in depressive symptoms and reduction in interpersonal problems in the treatment of depression. PE has also been associated with increases in assertiveness and sociability and decreases in personal responsibility in relationships (Greenberg & Watson, 1998).

Six outcome studies examining overall treatment, session outcome and process predictors of outcome were reviewed by Greenberg, Rice and Elliot (1993). Greenberg and Webster (1982) looked at amelioration of indecisiveness following a six-week brief experiential therapy, which included the Gestalt Two-Chair technique. Clients who resolved their decisional conflicts, referred to as “resolvers” (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993), showed a significant reduction in indecisiveness and anxiety and increased improvement and greater behavioral change than those who did not resolve their conflict. Following the session in which a key experientially therapeutic event, or marker, occurred, resolvers reported significantly greater conflict resolution, greater mood change and goal attainment and less discomfort than non-resolvers.

In another study of decisional conflicts, Clarke and Greenberg (1986) compared brief Process-Experiential (PE) including the Two-Chair technique to behavioral problem solving and a wait-list control group. The Process-Experiential treatment was significantly more effective at reducing indecision than either the behavioral problem-solving or the control.

Process-Experiential therapy has also been shown to be effective at increasing new self-understanding (Wiseman, 1986) and significantly more effective than a



psychoeducational approach at improvements in interpersonal problems, self-acceptance, symptoms and target complaints (Paivio & Greenberg, 1992).

In the treatment of depression, an integrative Process-Experiential approach provided significant clinical changes during and up to six months following treatment (Elliott, et al, 1990; Jackson & Elliott, 1990). These changes were comparable to changes recorded in a similar study of cognitive and dynamic treatments. The post-treatment changes by client self-report were improvements in general mood and self-esteem, increases in optimism and independence, and greater coping ability.

An investigative analysis of the helping factors within Process-Experiential therapy was conducted by Mancinelli (1992) and reported by Greenberg, Rice and Elliott (1993). The grounded theory analysis revealed the features of an "optimal helpful experience" as described by depressed clients. The first of three features in sequential order was the experience of a safe and facilitative working environment in which there was confidentiality, empathy, support and the freedom to talk. The second feature included the client processes involved in the experiential exploration of emotion through exercises such as role-plays. The effectiveness of this feature was not limited to emotion explored within the therapy session. Experiences outside of the session that were related to session content were also related to PE and seen by clients as part of its helpfulness. The third helpful feature of PE as experienced by clients in this study was a sense of progress resulting from client efforts. Clarification of the problems that need to be worked on, gaining insight and "problem solution and relief" were examples of evidence of progress as reported by clients.



One problem with this research is that the early studies were conducted on fragmented approaches and interventions without an underlying unifying theory. They also used very brief treatments (Elliott, 2000). Much of the research on the effectiveness of experiential therapies involved low numbers of participants. There was little plurality of approaches to either methodology or measurement. Most employed participant self-report from memory. It is difficult to anticipate how these approaches would fare under a variety of methodologies.

Participants typically presented with general self-esteem or interpersonal issues. It would be unwise to apply these findings to specific populations. It is also difficult to control for intervening variables that might confound the effects of the treatments, especially in those studies employing only pre and post-test measures.

#### *Process-Experiential Psychotherapy Practice*

The practice of Process-Experiential Psychotherapy (PEP) emphasizes the emotional process of moment-by-moment construction of meaning, and via a safe and prizing therapist-client relationship, facilitates shifts in meaning.

In practice, PEP looks very much like an integrative client-centered/Gestalt approach. In fact, PEP, like Rogerian Client-Centered Therapy, considers the presence of a genuine and prizing relationship and the provision of accurate empathy to be the necessary components of successful change. The difference in the two practices is that while Rogerian Client-Centered sees these as necessary and sufficient, PEP sees them as necessary "if not quite" sufficient. PEP requires interventions that facilitate client experience and are aimed at reorganizing the meaning-making process. In that respect it is like Gestalt therapy, and in fact, employs the same interventions as Gestalt.

The therapist employing PEP process interventions is attending to what is happening in the moment versus what happened in the past. The focus is on what the client is experiencing and what they are expressing about that experience. Because the theoretical stance is that the emotional scheme provides the organization of experience and action, the therapist is attending to the affective significance of the experience most closely.

### Experiential Career Exploration Group

The experiential group utilized in the current study was designed to foster career preparation and exploration with “stalled” and problematically transitioning individuals. This group approach combined experiential learning and therapeutic methods to facilitate self-discovery as well as create new knowledge of self (interests and values as well as beliefs about self-efficacy) and the world of work and the skills that go along with success within it.

The group was developed as part of Project HOPE (Honoring Occupational and Personal Empowerment) and was designed to include approximately 30 – 36 hours of contact time, during which participants met in a group. The content and activities of the program curriculum were organized around four basic stages, which were modified somewhat depending on the type of group but follow a generally consistent pattern.

*Stage 1: Self-exploration, goal-setting, validating dreams.* The primary purpose of Stage 1 activities was to reinforce, develop or foster greater self-efficacy, both for work-related skills and for moving off of welfare. The initial session began with an ice-breaker exercise and a reiteration of the HOPE philosophy. Specific activities in this stage included interest assessments and exploration activities, values clarification



activities, identifying and reinforcing the importance of skills utilized in daily life, and matching interests and skills to potential work areas. Both interests and skills were also discussed in the group, which resulted in additional peer recognition of skills that some participants did not recognize in themselves. Values exploration was primarily conducted during group sessions, through card-sort and forced choice activities. All of these areas were integrated in group discussion and resulted in each individual setting preliminary goals. During this phase of the group, exercises such as a group-level sharing of current vocational situation were employed. This served to normalize and validate individual situations. This triggers a thought of “Hmm, these other folks are in similar situations. I’m not alone”. With guidance from facilitators, participants were asked to visualize their dream job. This allowed them to experience their career-related interests in a vivid way as well as to experience unconstrained thinking. The goal was to gain new knowledge of their interests and values, and to experience success at overcoming constrained thinking. At that point, the group then moved into Stage 2, where they identified the barriers to reaching those goals.

*Stage 2: Identifying barriers.* In Stage 2, each individual participant identified the various concerns that they thought might get in the way of achieving or moving toward their goals. This was done individually through a Barrier Log (completed as a Taking It Home activity), in which participants recorded the barriers they identified over the course of one week. Participants used this to help each other identify barriers and, ultimately, brainstorm ideas for overcoming those barriers. Interpersonal communication and self-presentation were topics that were inserted into the group sessions wherever appropriate. In relation to the golf ball metaphor presented in the introduction, this begins to remove



the tight covering that helps to hold their barriers in place. It aids them in dreaming forward which leads to thinking forward which later leads to planning forward and subsequently moving forward.

Another exercise asked participants to create a collage that showed where they were and where they wanted to be with a river separating the two locations. Upon completion, participants discussed their creation. This exercise was designed to both identify barriers and to shift the locus of control inward, allowing participants to get around defense mechanisms and opens up pathways to allow previously unconscious or unexpressed self knowledge into awareness. The goal was for participants to experience a new viewpoint on their situation using visual cues, and begin to recognize, acknowledge and operationalize barriers. Through sharing their work with others, they were also expected to gain new perspective from peers and facilitators and begin the problem-solving process.

*Stage 3: Identifying strategies to overcome barriers.* During Stage 3, a variety of skills-training strategies were implemented to assist participants overcome barriers. Many of these are consistent with the so-called “soft skills”, transferable skills or “SCANS skills” recommended by the Secretary (of Labor)’s Commission for Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1992). SCANS skills include those skills and preparation that employers have indicated are essential for successful performance by employees. They consist of five workplace competencies (the effective use of resources, interpersonal skills, technology, systems, and information). These competencies are supported by three categories of foundation skills: reading, writing, mathematics, speaking and listening (Basic Skills), the ability to learn, to reason, to think creatively, to make decisions, and to

solve problems (Thinking Skills), and individual responsibility, self-esteem and self-management, sociability, and integrity (Personal Qualities).

Specifically, the group practiced strategies for improving effective communication, including assertiveness, setting boundaries, dealing with problematic work situations, and problem-solving. Individual group members also planned strategies for addressing educational barriers, such as pursuing additional training and identifying on-the-job training opportunities. Each activity conducted during this stage focused on some specific skills or strategy for overcoming identified barriers. However, taken together, the goals of Stage 3 included developing greater self-efficacy, improved self-confidence and self-esteem, and readiness to implement work-related behaviors in “real-world” settings. That implementation was the focus of Stage 4.

*Stage 4: Implementing strategies and developing an exit plan.* In this final stage, the participants were responsible for carrying out a variety of specific job-search or work-exploration tasks. These included information interviews, job shadowing assignments, developing or refining a resume, and practicing interview skills. These activities were developed to provide additional information about the world of work, to allow practice of essential skills in a relatively safe environment, and to help participants clarify their goals. This then led to the final step, which was the development of an exit plan. In the exit plan, each participant met with a group facilitator and reviewed the next steps he or she would take to meet their long-term goals. Typically, these included educational and job application plans. However, many participants also noted strategies for obtaining drivers’ licenses, securing reliable childcare, and continuing to work on mental health and interpersonal needs.



Participants were invited to role-play difficult interpersonal interactions and communication issues and are assisted in generating new communication behaviors. They are then encouraged to practice those in role-plays and in the group. Periodic facilitator check-ins and reflections on the use of the new skills reinforces transferal of the knowledge to life outside the group.

Throughout all stages of the group, participants were frequently given assignments to take home and work on or practice outside the group. This practice was also designed to facilitate knowledge transferal. Although the Project HOPE curriculum contains too many individual components to discuss thoroughly here, the above examples are representative of the approaches used and provide a good overview of the functioning of the group.

### Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the self-report of experience of an understudied population, vocationally stalled adults, participating in an experiential career group intervention. A further purpose was to analyze the observations of participants' in-the-moment events and interactions in Project HOPE to determine if the factors optimum for change as discussed in both experiential learning and therapy theory and the career group model are present in the sessions analyzed. In other words, does what we observe present evidence of the processes involved in change as outlined in theory?

### Research Questions

1. What is the experience of vocationally-stalled adults engaged in an experiential career preparation group intervention?



2. What indications of the factors optimum for change from an experiential perspective can be identified in the analysis of the participants' experience?

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### Participants

Subjects were adult participants in Project HOPE who were both referred in to the program by various partnered community agencies and self-referred from various advertisements posted in public establishments throughout the community and within community agency offices. The original pool of participants contained both volunteer, self-referred participants and those who were, in essence, mandated by their assisting agencies to attend. The mandate was sometimes overt by threat of sanction and sometimes covert by way of what might be characterized as strong encouragement.

Participants in this study were 12 females and one male ranging in age from 21 to 43 with a mean age of 26.46 ( $SD = 7.08$ ). Of this group, six were self-referred or strongly encouraged, and seven were mandated to attend. Two were married, four were divorced, and the remaining 7 were single. Eight were parents. Seven participants had attended some form of higher education, including one who had completed a degree program, and three were currently enrolled in higher education programs. Eleven were transitioning off of some level of assistance, including TANF, housing assistance, child career assistance, and/or medical assistance. Of that number, nine were still actively receiving assistance and the remaining two were newly self-sufficient. Of the 11 transitioning participants,

participation in the program was either overtly mandated or strongly encouraged by a caseworker from an assisting agency for nine participants.

### Researchers

Project HOPE staff members included a faculty member, two counseling psychology doctoral candidates, one of whom is the primary researcher, two counseling psychology doctoral students, and three counseling masters students. All staff members took part in the facilitation of the group sessions.

The analysis team, described in more detail below, consisted of the primary researcher, the faculty member and volunteer doctoral students.

### Instrument

At the close of each session participants completed an adapted version of the Session Impacts Scale (Elliott & Wexler, 1994, SIS). This instrument is a self-report measure originally designed for clients to rate their experiences of the impact of a single session of individual therapy. It was derived from qualitative analysis of clients' open-ended descriptions of significant therapy events. It was created to measure specific content of clients' reactions to sessions. With the permission of the authors, I made slight changes to the text of the SIS anchors to more closely reflect the group setting.

In both its original form and as adapted for this study, the SIS is a set of 16 items in three subscales. Two of the three 5-item subscales, Task Impacts and Relationship Impacts, also constitute a 10-item Helpful Impacts Scale. The third scale contains 6 items related to Hindering Impacts.

Each item is rated on a 5-point anchored scale (1=not at all, 2=slightly, 3=somewhat, 4=pretty much, and 5=very much). Participants were asked to rate each



item based on which anchor best fits their experience for that session. Examples of items include:

- Realized something new about myself.
- Progress toward knowing what to do about problems.
- Too much pressure or not enough direction from the therapist.

Internal reliability for the Task Impacts and Relationship Impacts scales for the original SIS as reported by the authors were good, at .84 and .91. The combined factors Helpful Impacts scale had slightly higher reliability at .92. In this study the internal reliability for the Task Impacts was low at .37. Relationship Impacts was good at .84, and the Helpful Impacts scale was adequate at .67. The alpha for Hindering Impacts scale in the original study was adequate at .67 while in this study it was good at .92.

#### SIS Session Rankings

For the purpose of obtaining a net SIS rating for each of the sessions, at the close of each session participants completed the Session Impacts Scale (Elliott & Wexler, 1994). Individual participants' ratings on each of the SIS subscales were summed and a mean subscale rating for each of the three subscales was obtained for each session. Then the session mean on the Hindering Impacts subscale was subtracted from the Helpful Impacts Scale rating. This resulted in an overall net mean SIS rating for each session. Sessions were ranked according to their net mean.

Twenty-two sessions were ranked on the Session Impact Scale (SIS). The net ratings ranged from 40 on the high end to a low net rating of 15.25. Of the twenty-two ranked sessions, 9 were found to have at least 45 minutes of tape that was audible enough to be transcribed. Of the nine ranked and audibly taped sessions, the 3 highest ranked and

the 3 lowest ranked were selected for analysis. The mean net SIS rating of the six analyzed sessions was 30.18.

Table 1. Net Session Impacts Scale Ratings for Transcribed Sessions by Rank.

Rank	Session #	Net Rating
1.	1	40
2.	5	35
3.	3	33
4.	6	25.33
5.	2	23.75
6.	4	22.5

#### SIS Item Analysis

Items on the SIS were rated on a Likert scale of 1-5 for whether or not the rater agrees or disagrees with the statement and to what degree with 1 equaling “Strongly Disagree” and 5 equaling “Strongly Agree”. Following are the item rankings listed from most highly endorsed item (1) to lowest endorsement (16) (Table 2). Though there was an item # 17 on the SIS it was not included in the means or the rankings as it required a narrative in response to “other important impacts”. The SIS item data were aggregated to reflect the indices as indicated in Table 3.

#### Procedure

Members of the Project HOPE team met with representatives from Job Service North Dakota’s JOBS Program, Grand Forks Housing Authority’s Family Self Sufficiency Program, and Grand Forks County Social Services. Each of these

representatives was given information about the grant-funded Project HOPE and invited to refer their program participants to Project HOPE to participate in the groups. Project HOPE team members also created flyers which they hung in local grocery stores, laundromats, lobbies of state and county agencies, etc. Interested persons were asked to contact the primary researcher of the grant project by phone to indicate their interest and to arrange for an intake interview.

Table 2. SIS Items Ranked by Mean Item Ratings.

Rank	Item	Mean	SD
1	7. Feel supported or encouraged.	4.16	.89
2	6. Feel the facilitator(s) understand me.	3.96	.90
3	2. Realized something new about someone else.	3.94	.85
4	9. Feel more involved in the group or inclined to work harder.	3.77	.85
5	3. More aware of or clearer about feelings, experiences.	3.72	.88
6	10. Feel closer to the group members	3.69	.96
7	8. Feel relieved, more comfortable.	3.61	1.02
8	1. Realized something new about myself.	3.55	.92
9	4. Definition of problems for me to work on.	3.51	.88
10	5. Progress toward knowing what to do about barriers.	3.42	.86
11	11. More bothered by unpleasant thoughts or more likely to push them away.	2.18	1.07
12	16. Impatient or doubting value of involvement.	1.91	1.02
13	12. Too much pressure or not enough direction from facilitators.	1.90	1.06
14	13. Feel the facilitator(s) doesn't understand me.	1.79	.99
15	15. Confused or distracted.	1.78	.94
16	14. Feel attacked or that my therapist doesn't care	1.59	.85



Table 3. SIS Aggregate Means for Impact Indices Including Items that Make Up Each Index.

Indices	Mean
Helpful Impacts	19.82
Task Impacts	19.11
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Realized something new about myself.</li> <li>2. Realized something new about someone else.</li> <li>3. More aware of or clearer about feelings, experiences.</li> <li>4. Definition of problems for me to work on.</li> <li>5. Progress toward knowing what to do about barriers</li> </ol>	
Relationship Impacts	20.54
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Feel the facilitator(s) understand me.</li> <li>7. Feel supported or encouraged.</li> <li>8. Feel relieved, more comfortable.</li> <li>9. Feel more involved in the group or inclined to work harder.</li> <li>10. Feel closer to the group members.</li> </ol>	
Hindering Impacts	9.72
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. More bothered by unpleasant thoughts or more likely to push them away.</li> <li>12. Too much pressure or not enough direction from facilitators.</li> <li>13. Feel the facilitator(s) doesn't understand me.</li> <li>14. Feel attached or that my therapist doesn't care.</li> <li>15. Confused or distracted.</li> <li>16. Impatient or doubting value of involvement.</li> </ol>	

The original pool of participants contained both volunteer, self-referred participants and those who were, in essence, mandated by their assisting agencies to

attend. The mandate was sometimes overt by threat of sanction and sometimes covert by way of what might be characterized as strong encouragement.

Participants completed a semi-structured entrance interview with a randomly selected staff member of Project HOPE. The interview included work and educational history, career interests and goals, exploration of physical and emotional health concerns, and a subjective assessment of cognitive level adequate for completion of the program tasks. Participants were assured confidentiality from the research team and were asked to provide one another firm assurance of confidentiality within and outside the group. Participants were provided with a thorough explanation of the benefits, risks and expectations of the study and their informed consent was elicited. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Dakota.

Members of the Project HOPE staff facilitated 22 sessions of psychoeducational group-based experiential career exploration. Each session, to a varying degree, contained elements of instruction, group process, experiential learning exercises and therapeutic experiential interventions. Each session was approximately three hours, containing an average two hours of actual substantive career-related content. Each session contained approximately one half hour break time and one half hour during which pen and paper exercises are being completed quietly. Sessions were taped using cassette tapes. The groups were held in comfortable, private settings. The facilitators worked to include all participants in the discussions.

A session was required to have at least two participants in order to qualify for group status and thereby for analysis for the purposes of this study. Due to attrition, low

enrollment, audiotaping failures, and other uncontrollable human factors, this resulted in nine session tapes acceptable for analysis.

Combinations of 2 of 3 staff facilitators conducted the sessions that were analyzed. Facilitator #1 is the primary researcher and was a middle-aged Caucasian female advanced doctoral student. Facilitator #2 was a middle-aged Caucasian female Masters student. The third facilitator was a Caucasian male Masters student in his twenties. All analyzed sessions were co-facilitated by Facilitator #2, three in conjunction with Facilitator #1 and three with Facilitator #3. Co-facilitators interacted directly with the participants to moderate the discussion and facilitate experiential programming.

### *Design and Analysis*

I used the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) method to analyze the group data. CQR is a qualitative method that was originally designed to analyze the experiences of clients in psychotherapy. The authors assert that the method is appropriate for studying any complex psychosocial phenomena. In this study, the method was adapted to analyze unstructured group discourse. Whereas Hill et al (1997) created the method to analyze reports of experience; this study applied the method to the analysis of real time events in order to make assumptions about the participants' in-the-moment experiences.

### *Analysis Team*

A team of 5 researchers took part in the analysis and worked together to construct a shared understanding of the data. The team consisted of the primary researcher, a faculty member who served as auditor, and a primary transcript analysis team of three doctoral students who began as GSAs and completed the project for credits in a research



practicum. Because the interpretation of the data employs the knowledge and understanding that individual team members bring to it, it is important to briefly describe the members of the team.

As the primary researcher, I am a doctoral candidate who has completed advanced coursework in career theories and the application of career counseling, as well as advanced coursework in group process. I have experience leading psychoeducational groups and have worked with the target population, both individually and in groups with a local social service agency. I co-authored the preliminary research with the target population that led to the development of the Project HOPE curriculum. I was the adult curriculum coordinator for Project HOPE and co-facilitated approximately half of the sessions within the data collection period. In addition to the in-depth knowledge of the Project and service delivery to this population, I bring personal understanding of the difficulties of transitioning from public assistance to financial self-sufficiency and preparation for a satisfying career to this study. In an attempt to limit the affect of the assumptions my past experiences led me to, I did not analyze the transcripts. I oversaw the consensus processes and assisted with the mapping process described below.

Rachel Darrow, Adam Guilmino, and Vanessa Rempel are doctoral students who have all completed coursework in career theories and in group process. They had each worked with the HOPE project in facilitating similar exercises in similar groups with members of the target population. Though their understanding of the dynamics and challenges of this population and of career counseling was not completely naïve, none of them was involved with facilitating the analyzed group sessions. They therefore had no

prior knowledge of any of the individual participants or the content of the sessions they analyzed.

Cindy Juntunen, the director of Project HOPE, is a faculty member and accomplished author in the field of psychology, vocational psychology specifically. She served as the auditor in the analysis process and brings extensive knowledge and experience with the subject matter as well as with the CQR method to her work with this study.

The members of the research team got together the first time to discuss our assumptions about this population and the analysis we were about to undertake. We concluded that the research team was bringing varied assumptions having to do with their childhood socioeconomic statuses. Two of the researchers had experienced few economic struggles and one had lived in an area where economic struggles and assistance were nearby. Each of the researchers expressed some mild adherence to cultural stereotypes of vocationally stalled adults. They each came with some previous knowledge gained from their work with this population. The primary researcher came with background personal knowledge of life on assistance and acknowledged strong biases in favor of her assumptions that the intervention would be successful in promoting satisfying career acquisition in this population.

The team met weekly to discuss the transcripts and to share interpretations. They made decisions about the meaning of the data by consensus and verified those decisions by systematically checking them against the raw data, as described in Hill et al (1997). Every effort was made to seek input from all team members equally.



### *Identification of Domains*

There were three steps to the data analysis. I distributed copies of the first transcribed session to the individual members of the research team. The team members read this session simultaneously but individually and marked their transcripts, coding them for domains that consisted of rationally derived topic areas. The initial list was derived from and logically suggested by items within the three subscales of the Session Impact Scale. These were refined and new domains were added as new data were read and analyzed. As domains emerged, team members designated participant discourse that fit within each domain. The team continued assigning data to different domains, determining which domains were reflected within each transcript. They then brought the marked data back to the meeting and discussed their interpretations until consensus was reached. The resulting list of domains included the following: affiliation, new knowledge, barriers, negative impacts and interesting interactions.

### *Core Ideas*

Once the team had discussed and agreed upon the domains for the individual transcripts, they identified core ideas within each of the domains. We created idea map graphics wherein we placed each domain surrounded by the corresponding core ideas that, by consensus, most logically fit within that domain. This process helped to clarify which core ideas might fit into more than one domain and to recognize overlap between them. When it became clear that two or more domains were overlapping significantly, they were collapsed into one. Likewise, when one domain was too inclusive, it was divided. The latter occurred, for instance, when it became apparent that there were two distinct processes occurring under the core idea name of sharing within the domain of



new knowledge. The team discussed the distinctions between these processes and arrived at the decision to split sharing into common ground and storytelling. The list of emerging core ideas includes the following examples: clarification, support, and out-of-session internal barriers.

#### *Audit of Core Ideas*

The core ideas, once determined, were listed within the domains in a master list, and checked against the raw data by the auditor who made suggestions for revision. The primary analysis team reviewed the auditor's suggestions and revised the list according to their best judgment.

Finally, in order to describe consistency transcripts the team compared domains and core ideas across sessions and collapsed them into categories. To accomplish this the team re-examined the core ideas across transcripts focusing on discovery to determine if any ideas had been overlooked or if new combinations of ideas were warranted. Following this analysis categories were formed based on the core ideas that clustered together. The auditor checked these categories and provided feedback about their clarity and consistency.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of each of the six sessions included in the final qualitative analysis of data. The purpose of this is to provide greater context for understanding the experience of the participants. The remainder of the chapter will focus on the interactions within each of these sessions, and the domains and categories of meaning that arose from those interactions.

#### Sessions

##### *Session 1*

The highest ranked session of the transcribed sessions, with a net SIS rating of 40, was a final session of a group comprised mainly of single mothers. In this session the task was to break into facilitator-participant dyads and form an exit plan for each of the participants to follow in pursuing their career interests. Together the facilitator and participant, using the information the participant has gained through activities in previous sessions, form long and short-range goals of the participant's choosing and outline the next steps of pursuing those goals. The transcript primarily involves one dyad and their work with educational planning and experiences.

##### *Session 2*

Ranked fifth with a net rating of 23.75, this session had five members, the highest number of participants of the transcribed sessions. The larger number of participants

resulted in a proportionately larger number of analyzable participant interactions. This is reflected in the richness of the analysis of this session.

This session included an initial cohesion-building exercise of reporting the positive and negative events of the week. The intent of this exercise, in addition to building relationships in the group and relieving some of the pressure to process these weekly events at the beginning of the session, so that focus could later be placed on the session tasks and away from tangential storytelling.

The planned task for this session was to explore personal and career-related values using a values card sort game where participants are dealt a number of cards with value words written one to a card. They are asked to discard two of the value cards and to trade for values that others have. They are then asked to rank order their remaining values and share their choices with the group. The group discussed their experience of choosing, rejecting and prioritizing values.

In response to some interactions occurring within the group and to the work relationship events reported by one participant involving her passivity, the facilitators chose to forego the other planned activities in favor of using the opportunity to introduce and role-play assertiveness and other communication skills.

### *Session 3*

This session, ranked third with a net rating of 33.0, had three participants and also involved the Values Card Sort activity described above as well as a discussion of assertive communication. Assertiveness training, in this instance, was a planned activity and not spontaneously introduced in response to group interaction or self-reported need as in the previous session. Another planned exercise included in this session was a values



dilemma, wherein participants are given a time-limited problem to resolve as a group. They must work together to prioritize professions as they decide which 15 people, from a list of professions, will travel to a new cosmic colony as the Earth is facing destruction.

#### *Session 4*

This session involved two participants. It is ranked sixth with a net rating of 22.5. In this session, participants are asked to participate in role-plays of information interviews in anticipation of doing one in person in the coming week. They had previously identified professions that they would like to know more about based on their exploration of values, interests, ability and barriers. Facilitators had helped them to identify some individuals employed in the community in the fields of interest and would help them make connections with these individuals or businesses.

#### *Session 5*

This session, ranked second with a rating of 35, had two participants. In this session facilitators led the participants in The Party Game, an experiential approach to defining interests and skills in terms of the Holland (1959) RIASEC Codes. This exercise results in a three-letter code that indicates a combination of interests and skills within the categories of Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional. An exhaustive listing of professions have been categorized according to their fit within this scheme of two or three letter codes.

In this session participants also created and talked about their lifeline from birth the present, noting important life events and the ages at which they occurred. The Participants were then asked to create a line continuing from the present and representing the participant's hope for the future path of their life, highlighting personal and career-

based milestones. The intent is to help participants dream forward in preparation for planning forward, to help them to mark those events in their lives that have impacted their career paths, and to help them to visualize the possibility of a desired change in path, increasing their hope in the possibilities of the future.

### *Session 6*

This session had four participants, one of which was the only male participant represented in the set of six transcripts. It was ranked fourth at a net rating of 25.33. In this session participants completed an exercise entitled “When I am 40...” wherein they attempt to project themselves into the future to the age of 40 and asks them to then look back on what they have accomplished between the present and age 40. They were asked to address their accomplishments in several areas of their lives including Family and Home, Education/Intellectual, Spirituality, Community, Financial, and Health. The intent of this exercise is to encourage participants to broaden their dreaming and preliminary goal-setting into many areas of life other than just financial, their typical focus. This session also included The Party Game as described in the previous session description.

### *Domains and Categories*

The final analysis and coding of the transcripts by the research team produced a list of 5 categories and 14 core ideas, as summarized in Table 4. I have included one sub-category we have titled “Isolated Noteworthy Events” and its 4 core ideas. Though these items do not qualify as core ideas in CQR given that they are isolated events, we included them here for the purpose of discussing their potential impacts. The 5 domains are affiliation, barriers, new knowledge, negative impacts, and Isolated Noteworthy Events.

I have included the participants' words throughout the presentation of findings, to illustrate the conclusions I have drawn and to bring their voices into this representation of their experience. Participant numbers replace names in all of the references to participants. To further protect the confidentiality of participants I have also omitted the name of any location that has been discussed.

### *Affiliation*

The domain of Affiliation is a general domain as it occurred in all sessions across the six sessions transcribed regardless of the composition of the group or tasks presented. It contains indicators of communication behaviors that facilitate bonding between group members and between members and facilitators. Affiliation focuses on the processes involved in feeling connected. It includes those processes that appear to increase a sense of belonging in the group participants. This sense of affiliation may be lacking from welfare recipients' daily lives, as they can feel isolated and ostracized by society. This domain organizes the data in terms of what appears to be processes that facilitate cohesiveness and feelings of affiliation from those likely more effective processes including common ground, support, and identity statements, to the somewhat less effective methods of affiliating such as affirmations, clarification and storytelling.

### *Common Ground*

The core idea titled Common Ground, a typical idea, occurring in at least half of the six transcribed sessions, indicates instances of bonding through the sharing of familiar experiences culminating in a shared group identification of "we are..." or "we are not..." stated or implied.



Table 4. Domains and Categories

Affiliation	General*	Negative Impact	General
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common Ground</li> <li>• Clarification</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> <li>• Identity Statement</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Affirmation</li> </ul>	<p>Typical**</p> <p>General</p> <p>Typical</p> <p>General</p> <p>Typical</p> <p>General</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From Facilitators</li> <li>• From Group</li> </ul>	<p>Typical</p> <p>Variant</p>
Barriers	General	Isolated Noteworthy Events	Typical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-session Internal</li> <li>• In-session External</li> <li>• Out-of-session Internal</li> <li>• Out-of-session External</li> </ul>	<p>Typical</p> <p>Typical</p> <p>Typical</p> <p>General</p> <p>General</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaningful and emotional personal revelation</li> <li>• Facilitator/ Participant Conflict</li> <li>• Aggressive Group Confrontation</li> </ul>	<p>Typical</p> <p>Variant</p> <p>Variant</p>
New Knowledge	Variant***		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Insight</li> <li>• Requesting Information</li> <li>• Giving Information</li> </ul>	<p>Typical</p> <p>General</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bonding through humor</li> <li>• Lack of comprehension/ unequal ability of participants</li> </ul>	<p>Variant</p> <p>Variant</p>

\* General indicates that the domain or category occurred across all sessions

\*\* Typical indicates that the domain or category occurred in greater than or equal to ½ of the sessions

\*\*\* Variant indicates that the domain or category occurred in fewer than ½ of the sessions

The group-level sharing of current vocational situation may have served to normalize and validate individual situations. Participants who previously felt isolated and alone in their situations could experience a change in their self-image as a result of discovering that they share common ground with other participants. Unlike storytelling, a core idea I will discuss later in this section, the sharing of common ground results in a significant recognition of shared experience among group members. The following example of the sharing of common ground occurred in Session Two. In this sample, #25 has been sharing her experiences of a past employer with the group.

23: (Note: Throughout the results, I will identify responses by the respective participant number). I used to have a boss like that myself. I told him, Hey, I think you're being unprofessional. I think, you know, you're [acting] badly out there and it's not like that. This is your office.

25: It's degrading and humiliating

This core idea illustrates the bonding that occurred between group members, as well as between members and facilitators. Bonding seemed to facilitate a feeling of connection necessary for trust, the building of safe relationships within which the corrective emotional experience of being consistently prized while being accurately "seen" can occur.

### *Support*

Support, another typical core idea within Affiliation includes encouragement, assistance, celebration, cooperation, and collaboration with members or facilitators. Following is an example, from early in Session Two, of the type of encouragement members offered one another in half or more of the sessions.

Facilitator #1: Should we just get started maybe by telling a little about our week and we'll go from what was worst to what was best again and what our week was like

22: I don't know just losing the job....

Facilitator #1: What a big disappointment

Facilitator #2: Yeah

Facilitator #1: Well it sounds like your worst thing

22: Especially when it was seven fifty an hour

Facilitator #2: yeah

21: well that's ok, you'll find something better probably

In another example from the same session, participants showed support by celebrating with a fellow participant whose growing family had an opportunity for better, more affordable housing.

24: My best thing is we found out that we might be able to rent a four-bedroom house for \$300 per month.

(Multiple voices): "WOOOO!"

The availability of the experience of being supported for this population may itself be a corrective emotional experience. Assistance recipients encounter a lot of criticism and scrutiny in all walks of life. They more often feel scolded and shamed, especially by the system's representatives.

### *Identity Statement*

Another category within the Affiliation domain is Identity Statement. A general category occurring in all of the sessions, it is a declaration of "I am..." or "I am not..."



involving self-awareness but not apparent new insight. In processing a mock information interview with a particularly talkative interviewee that Participant #21 has just completed in Session Four, she makes the following statement of her identity.

Facilitator #1: You stopped her when you needed to...

21: Yeah but I'm nice, I'll just listen, I'll just keep listening till [she's] done.

In another display of self-awareness the same participant makes a statement of her identity as an assistance recipient.

Facilitator #2: It sounds like you want your independence; but at this point in time maybe, it's ok to take a little help here and there, to get to that independent point.

What do you think?

21: Yeah, I just don't like it.

This type of candid statement about the participant's identity can offer knowledgeable facilitators information about the participant's self-image, particularly for the purposes of a career transition group, the participant's self-efficacy. It can offer indications of hopelessness and give the facilitators information about how to formulate interactions and exercises with participants to offer them opportunities for change.

### *Affirmations*

Included within this group are Affirmations, a general category occurring in all sessions within the analysis. They amount to simple confirmations of understanding and/or indications of agreement or affirmations of correct reflections of content, meaning, or emotion. The last type, affirmation of emotion, is by definition indicative of the existence of accurate empathy. This example is taken from Session Three during assertiveness training. Facilitator #3 used a metaphor to characterize Participant #32's

anger. The accuracy of the empathy that the facilitator has communicated is affirmed by the participant's response.

Facilitator #3: So it's almost like a, like a, almost like a volcano.

32: Yeah, I just let it build, and let it build until you can't stand it anymore and then.

Facilitator #3: Swish, it all goes.

The facilitator in this instance was able to display understanding and empathy to the participant that allowed her to more deeply experience and express the emotion that accompanies the struggles of dealing with barriers on a day-to-day basis. This might help the participant to transcend the authority figure/assistance recipient relationship that is common for recipients and that frequently leads to defensiveness.

Also in this instance, the participant is applying ineffective communications that result in outbursts in her relationships with co-workers, friends and family. Here she was able to describe and discuss this ineffective communication style, and thus was able to receive help and feedback in the group. Improvements in her communication style may serve as a transferable work skill that could improve her chances of finding and keeping satisfying employment in the future.

In another example from Session Three, the content of the exchange is practical, rather than emotional, but the outcome similarly results in increased sharing of the participant's experience:

Facilitator #2: The daycare is expensive enough as it is.

32: Yeah, and then I only get like \$100 a month from job service for transportation. If I went the taxi way, that's not enough.

Assistance recipients trying to make this necessary transition often do not feel heard or understood by social service agents. The facilitator in this instance is able to validate the participant's feelings of stress and her experience of the difficulty of budgeting on assistance while trying to transition into the workforce. The facilitator allowed her to openly share the fears and doubts she was experiencing

### *Clarification*

The next core idea within Affiliation is Clarification and, as a general category, occurred in every session in the analysis. Clarification involves further explanation of something already said or implied. It can occur in the form of requests for more information or the communication of more information.

Requests for further explanation can indicate interest in or engagement with the task or subject matter. The net effect of engagement at a level that allows for a metacognitive analysis is an increase in the potential for learning to take place.

One participant in Session Six, #63, while completing the "When I am 40..." group task asked, "What does intellect mean? Intellectual?" Another in the same session, #62 asks, "What do you mean by development of mind?" Although these are simple requests for clarification, they do indicate engagement in the process.

Spontaneous clarification from the participant is another type of Clarification coded within this category and may indicate a feeling of the need to explain oneself. This could be an indication of low self-esteem or it could indicate the kind of ineffective boundaries that develop as a result of the invasive nature of questioning that assistance recipients encounter on a frequent basis with the assisting agencies as well as with family and friends. Either way this type of ineffective and even inappropriate communication



can be a clear indicator of poor social skills that can be a barrier to a satisfying career. In this example from Session Two, #21 explains why her child has a black eye.

21: I don't have a bad thing this week except for those people who stare at you who think you're beating your kid, of course I want to beat them back but I'll control myself...(My daughter) has this big black eye from this chair. People just look at you and I'm like "whatever I should go over there and hit you and give you a black eye"...I am very very defensive when people stare. But I guess I am kinda the same way ... it just comes into your head cuz I'll be like "ah kids are [clumsy]" and then it just goes out of my head ...but some people are like, they just stare. Like I brought my kid to [a restaurant] and they just stared. I just wanted to walk up there and be like "What the hell are you staring at?" I'm like, "No, you want to ask her? Ask her what happened. She'll tell you exactly what happened." You can tell she's not lying because she's like "my shoes are too big and I came running and I ran into the chair" that's the way she says it.

Facilitator #2: It's hard when you feel like people are judging you.

While the clarification within the discourse is not spontaneous in that the facilitator requests clarification of the participant's opening statement, the participant's choice to lead into discussion of her daughter's black eye is seen within this analysis as spontaneous clarification. The participant spontaneously chose to create an opportunity to clarify the group's understanding of her daughter's black eye. As her daughter had passed through the group room area before the session began, she may have anticipated that the facilitators and other group members would wonder if she was abusing her child. This is

likely in response to the long-standing societal stereotype that assistance recipients are child abusers.

### *Storytelling*

A more intense level of the same communication barrier may be evident in those responses coded within the Storytelling theme. These longer, more involved responses were found in at least half but not all of the sessions. They were found to involve differing levels of relevance to group tasks. The more tangential the content of the storytelling, the higher the likelihood that it reflected a persistent deficit in the effective communication skills that are often necessary for success in the workplace. Often the storytelling revealed weak personal boundaries that left the speaker unprotected and unnecessarily vulnerable to oppression and exploitation in addition to making them just plain hard to be around in the workplace. One participant's response to a request within Session Three for discussion of problem-solving behavior, though only mildly tangential, presents an example of these poorly formed boundaries:

Facilitator #1 ...How do you go about solving problems in your daily life?

32: The other day I was making a big deal about the shirt I wanted to wear. And I have those bras that [are] white, but have black print across the chest. And it was, and I wanted to wear this really light tan shirt. And I'm like, I wonder if I have to wear this and all my other ones are dirty. Like my other bras were dirty and I'm like, fine I'm going to wear that shirt. So I took one dirty [bra] out of the laundry and I'm like, that's just so pathetic I had plenty of shirts to wear and I had to pick a dirty one, a dirty bra out of the laundry just so I could wear that shirt. That's just so upsetting.

As the same response continued, it became more tangential, and more revealing.

Facilitator #1: Did that shirt, does it have any significance, is it...?

32: I did buy it right after [my son] was born. I went shopping to buy clothes that would fit. And I went to [local store] when it was their grand opening and bought a whole bunch of stuff and it felt cool cause I could buy all this stuff. It was like, you get more stuff there because of the better deals. So I got a couple of shirts and a pair of jeans... Yea, I buy white jeans and I wear them twice. So they got a mud stain on them that won't come out.

Facilitator #1: But [it sounds like] those two times were so good...

It sounds like maybe that shirt kind of represents a good feeling for you.

32: Yea, I think its kind of funny; before [my son] was born I was always wearing these shirts that were low cut, kind of like down to here. Didn't show any cleavage, cause I don't have a whole lot. But, they were kind of low cut and now I don't really. I have this yellow shirt, I don't need to wear..., but that was really low cut and almost shows cleavage. It's pretty low cut for me cause I don't have any. I don't know what happened to it. It's a good thing I lost it. Because all my other clothes, I mean, cover up pretty good. That's not how I used to be.

Facilitator #1 To get back to the problem solving thing ... What kind of things went into that decision do you think?

32: Funny, I was, was, throwing clothes, shirts out of my drawer, like I want to wear this one. I went, no I don't want to wear that one so I threw it out on my bed. Pull another one out, no I don't want to wear that one, threw it out on the bed. I kept doing that until I came to that one.



Facilitator #2 Sounds like a process of elimination.

An example of more tangential storytelling occurs during a values card sort exercise in Session One and seems to derail the task completely.

32: My top one is, time for family. [My son] is the most important to me. Cause, I don't know, my sister's jealous of me cause. Before, when we moved here, her and I made a pact with when we graduated from college we would both move back to Michigan. But, now that [My son] is born, I decided to stay here because the people are friendlier. And it's lots safer. And I think that kind of why I chose to, she was always yelling at, a little more than yelling, but. He gets on her nerves, it's just the stupidest thing, And it makes her mad cause I don't have a room there anymore. Cause all my stuff is at the apartment. So, I sleep in her room cause she has a queen size bed. So, and she gets mad cause I bring him in bed with me. Like, ok, I was nursing him for a long time. It was a lot easier to bring him in bed with me. She's, "well I don't like it when he keeps getting up in the middle of the night." It's bothering her.

Tangential storytelling may have detracted from the learning environment to some extent in that it slowed the progress of the sessions. It was, however, understood by facilitators as representing a communication deficit in need of remediation, therefore part of the process. Though storytelling interrupted the flow of the exercises in these sessions, fellow participants of the storytellers seemed to react with patience to the interruptions. There were times, difficult to represent in transcribing, that other participants could be heard whispering to one another in the background, but these instances were few and brief.

Less tangential storytelling appears to have increased cohesion in the group as participants came to know one another more intimately. This level of sharing gave the group sessions a less rigid, less task oriented feel and allowed for the introduction of humor, sadness, fear and joy. Storytelling allowed participants and facilitators to bond. This sample is from Session Two.

21: Yea, well I have one of my coworkers who gets really drunk, and he's so funny, cause I'm thinking it's my birthday and your drunker than I am and I'm dancing a slow dance with you but I'm holding you up, it's just funny. We were dancing and he was like "just remember we're co-workers, we're co-workers" and I was like "I don't care, I mean I don't like you like that anyway."

21: The [birthday] card [he gave me] was telling me all positive things about him and cause he wants to find a girl who would like stay at home and be a housewife.

Facilitator #1: Is that what you'd like?

21: No, that's what he wants, he wants someone because he's like, "I'll be gone from 8 to 5 and she can do whatever she wants. And then all I want is for her be home at 5 o'clock," and I'm like, yea, have a clean house, and cook and then he'd say, "no she doesn't have to do that, but if she'd like to do that it would be nice".

23: Ha Ha, yeah right. For now, for the start of it all. Give it a month. Laughter  
Good looking man...you know what I mean, it's so funny.

21: But he said because he grew up in a two-parent household, they worked, like their asses off. That's why he wants his wife to be home with the kids. And I'm like, that's cool but that's not me, so quit trying.

(Many voices)



21: I'll never, never ever date you ever. I'm, "quit my job just for you? Ok, I've known you how long? A little over a month?"

This type of bonding through storytelling, though somewhat revealing, did not have the same tangential quality as the previous example. It seemed to engage the other members rather than being self-absorbed. While the other participants verbalized agreement with the speaker's opinion, this level of storytelling did not result in a significant recognition of shared experience among group members.

### *Barriers*

Barriers, the second general domain, occurring in all of the analyzed sessions, points to those intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers that exist in addition to the common barriers to vocational satisfaction encountered by others and effectively addressed through other career counseling theories and methods. These extra barriers come from many sources that are inherent in the role of a vocationally stalled individual.

This category encompasses barriers from all sources classified according to the source of the barrier and the nature of the conflict. In this domain, participants in the study both displayed and relayed knowledge of barriers to satisfying employment they are facing or have faced in the past. These included Internal barriers, defined as those barriers that involve internal cognitive, emotional, and physical processes. These include processes such as lacking vocationally related self-knowledge about interests, values, and skills, lacking knowledge of the work world, lacking knowledge of opportunities (i.e. child care assistance), physical problems, low self-efficacy, and self-deprecating thoughts and behaviors, as well as any other barriers that contribute to a vocational stall. Other barriers to satisfying employment that were reported or that appeared were External in



nature, involving interactions with those outside the participant, often times situational in nature. They included unchallenging work, parenting issues, communication issues, financial problems, etc. These are then coded according to where the barrier presents itself, whether In-session or Out of Session.

### *In-Session Internal Barriers*

In this example from Session Two of another typical category, which occurred in at least half of the analyzed sessions, In-Session Internal Barrier, one participant displayed a mild lack of knowledge of the career-related language used in one of the in-session tasks., #24 states, “Hmmm, I guess I was thinking of serving mankind as like being a waitress or something.” This statement was made in response to a request from the facilitator for an explanation of why #24 had rejected Social Service as a value in the Values Card Sort exercise. She had stated that she had no intention of serving people for a living. She made the foregoing statement following an explanation of the meaning of this value.

In another instance from Session Four, Participant #22 reports a missed opportunity to interview for a position because she didn’t know that the JOBS program she was working with would have provided childcare while she interviewed.

Facilitator #1: So you went in and you applied?

22: Well I went in and applied. I didn’t know this but they said that we could have gotten somebody to watch him so I could go in there ..., to save my job, and I didn’t know and you don’t think of [asking] anything.

This example also further illustrates the constrained thinking that may interfere with question asking behavior and with assistance recipients like Participant #22 getting their needs met.

The next excerpt is an example of how low self-efficacy presents an In-session Internal barrier frequently seen among assistance recipients. The transcript of Session Five begins in the middle of a discussion between Participant #10 and the facilitator. The participant has commented that she would like to start a line of products for left-handed people. She names several items that she would like to see created and made available for lefties. When asked what steps she might take to bring this about she responds with what seems to be a lack of awareness of her own ability or the fact that she has already completed the idea phase of the inventing process.

10: I don't know. I'm not very good at inventing. I'd maybe have something invented. Like someone invent it for me.

It is clear how constrained thinking can inhibit creativity, independence and forward motion in transitioning assistance recipients. A failure to initiate the process of assessment of her own knowledge has allowed this participant to assume that she is "not very good" at accomplishing something she has in fact already accomplished. This begs the question of how else and in what other areas of her life and the lives of other recipients does this lack of engagement with metacognition influence not only their self-efficacy but also their decisions to try new behaviors and new career paths.

### *Out-of-Session External Barriers*

The following is an example from Session Two of the effect of unchallenging work, which is considered an Out Of Session External Barrier, a general core idea that was present in every session analyzed.

25:...And I need to use my mind because I hate mindless jobs...where my legs were rubber and so was my brain. And I was like "How in the hell do I walk down these stairs and go and smoke a cigarette now?" I mean, I just felt, just numbness all over.

24: What did you do there?

25: The first two weeks we just stuffed boxes.

Barriers that occur outside of the session and that are also, currently at least, out of the participants control are an inherent part of the status of assistance recipients in the United States at this time. The discussion of why this is so and how social change can best be achieved and by whom is ongoing within the field of vocational psychology (Juntunen, Cavett, Clow, Darrow, & Guilmino, 2004). These external barriers are the stumbling blocks that recipients encounter and they are the problems that recipients recognize that non-recipients do not struggle with as often and appear to have the resources to avoid.

The freedom to share their struggles with these barriers with one another and with the facilitators without implied or expressed judgment of them as ungrateful may allow for a corrective emotional experience that may or may not be available in traditional career counseling. In a group of their peers, however, they are likely to hear empathy and or suggestions for how to deal with the various barriers. At the very least, talking about



these barriers with others who understand the struggle might help to reduce the stress they feel.

### *Out-of-Session Internal Barriers*

Within Session Two we hear an example of an Out Of Session Internal Barrier, a typical core idea occurring in at least half of the sessions. During a spontaneous assertiveness exercise, Participant #23 offered the following as an example of a relationship wherein she would like to be more assertive.

23: [My daughter] could talk her way out of everything, so. The only one I want to be more assertive with is her You know, more aggressive, like “do it!”, instead, I just go and do it myself... You know... I just cannot put my foot down and say, hey, this is what you’re going to do.

This participant has been living with a physical disability for nearly two years and is not currently employed. She interacts primarily with her family members, including her daughter. The significance of experiencing such a communication barrier within her relationship with her daughter is that she will likely respond in similar ways in other relationships, including relationships in the workplace.

Physical problems that interfere both in and out of session are the subject of the next excerpt. Within this example from Session Two we see an In Session Internal Barrier to full engagement with the session task become Clarification that highlights an Out of Session Internal Barrier to satisfying employment. In this example the participant has mentioned her back pain and the facilitator is checking in to determine if the participant is in pain in the moment.

Facilitator #1 Are you ok [right] now?

23: I ache, I really ache a lot and I got a headache so all the time,

21: taking pain killers

23: they don't give me painkillers; they don't want me to get addicted to them.

See it's been two years already. And for the first year I was all drugged up all the time and that's why I had to quit my job because I couldn't stay awake on the drive home from work and it was like, I'd start passing out, you know, so. Now I don't take anything, besides Ibuprofen and God I've been eating those like candy lately.

Facilitator #2: So basically you're just suffering though this.

23: That's all I can do, forever, so, you get used to it. You know, I'm pretty used to it. It just sucks.

Reports of internal barriers that clients struggle with outside of session are useful for facilitators to assess participant needs and use the information to guide in-session exercises and to offer opportunities for participants to practice new responses.

### *In-Session External Barriers*

This is a typical core idea occurring in at least half of the sessions. In the following example from Session Four we see how a facilitator's mistake or lack of organization presents an In Session External Barrier to the participant's success at completing an the arrangements for an information interview.

Facilitator #1: Yeah, so you're calling... who all are you calling?

21: Addiction counselor, well I don't know. You said that you were going to call someone down at UND, because I was going to call that ...halfway house or whatever.

Facilitator #1: Did I say that?

21: Yes you did.

Another type of In Session External Barrier that occurred involved distractions from various sources. These occurred despite the best efforts of the facilitators to arrange for a setting that was free from distractions. The difficulty in preventing this is an inherent part of real world research with this population. They often can only participate if they can bring their children. While Project HOPE provided a concurrent children's version of the career exploration group that occurred in the same building, the facilitators felt it necessary and compassionate to allow children to have access to their parents if they needed it. The following is an example from Session Three of this type of barrier.

Facilitator #2: Well, [children's group facilitator] will come in and get you if it gets to be too much for her. So, you know, I'm hoping you won't worry.

13 Oh, no, I'm not worried about that. It's him, he'll just keep coming back in here and...

In situations such as this one, parents consistently prioritized their children's needs higher than participation in the group. Their lack of family support or governmental support for their participation in the form of off-sight childcare necessarily put them at risk for missing some group participation or having their attention split between kids and tasks. In this case, for example, #13 chose to leave the session rather than allow her son's needs to interrupt the group or to ignore his needs.



### *New Knowledge*

New Knowledge, the third general domain, occurring in every session, involves a complex representation of indicators of learning in-the-moment, and the experience of success at overcoming constrained thinking as well as increasing self-awareness. An important type of new knowledge is that which arises internally. These responses are considered New Insight moments. New Knowledge is also the domain that indicates any new pieces of information that are added to the group by participants in the form of Giving Information or are requested by participants in Requesting Information. These two categories indicate new knowledge from external sources.

### *New Insight*

This is a variant category, occurring in fewer than half of the analyzed sessions, and includes instances of participants gaining new insight in the moment. Responses recorded in this category display evidence of “thinking out loud” and reaching some new conclusion that is relevant to self-understanding or new understanding of the world but does not appear to have deeply personal meaning or emotion, such as those included within the Isolated Noteworthy Events, as discussed later.

In the following examples, the new insight varies in its relevance to self-awareness and to knowledge of the world. In an assertive communication role-play Participant #24 is encouraged by a fellow participant to become assertive. Even though Participant #21 does not have a clear understanding of assertiveness, and is actually persuading her peer to be somewhat aggressive, her validation empowers #24 to entertain the possibility of responding to ridicule in something other than her usual passive way.

24: You mean start learning how to defend myself to people?

Facilitator #1: Yep, learning how to assert yourself.

21: Get blunt and yell at them

Facilitator #1: But in such a way that you get what you want rather than having somebody come right back at you like in a screaming match

24: Yeah, that would be nice. My teacher, she's frickin horrible

Facilitator #1: Maybe that's something we could do, would everyone be ok with that if we did that tonight?

21: Uh-huh

24: Oh you guys! I'm feeling really run down. I feel like people have taken advantage of me, and used me to the fullest and I just can't take it anymore.

Facilitator #1: Well now lets work on that then,

24: That would be cool

Facilitator #2: We can do that

Facilitator #1: We'll go from here to there

24: 101 ways to say "F U"

A young expectant mother, pursuing training in hairdressing, #24 was able to feel empowered through assertiveness role-plays in session. When asked why she was able to be assertive in the session she replied, "Because you guys are so easy to be with". She felt supported in her efforts to overcome her passivity.

Another of the experiential tasks in the group sessions was a values card-sort game where participants are dealt seven cards, each card containing the name of a value, at random from a deck containing two of each of 34 value names for a total of 68 cards.

Participants are given the task of deciding whether the values they were dealt are those that they prize most in their work. They are then given the opportunity to trade values with their peers and with the dealer. They are assisted in understanding the meaning of the values and weighing them against one another through open-ended prompts from the facilitators. They are finally asked to discard two values and prioritize the remaining five. In this excerpt from Session Three Participant #10 is prioritizing her career-related values. Her thought processes are apparent as she wrestles with the task.

10: I would like to be appreciated, I guess I don't need to be recognized, I don't think.

Facilitator #2: What do you see as being the difference?

10: Hmm, I don't really have a difference, but. But, I guess they don't really need to... Like I don't need an award or something, for what I'm doing, like a pat on the back or "you're doing good", or something like that.

For another participant this process of sorting values seemed more as though the work of sorting had been accomplished outside of her immediate awareness and that the exercise had helped the pre-formed values become conscious.

Facilitator #2 We all make decisions every day, they may be little or may be huge. But, well.

32: Even if you do weigh them differently, I don't know, but. [child's name] is more important to me than school, and I want to get out of school and get it over with and get my career, but. Also like, food and shelter and that's more important than, you need that to survive.



For one participant the experiential nature of the tasks presented in the group allowed her to experience a shift in her self-knowledge regarding her career-related interests. Prior to an experiential career interests activity called the Party Game exercise, Participant #31 appears to use guessing to narrow down her list of interests

31: oh, like working with children or animals or, I like to be outside a lot

Facilitator #1 Have you thought about how you might relate those things together?

31: I suppose it would be a daycare type thing

Moments later, having explored her interests within the context of the Party Game, she comments about the groups of interests she has chosen as follows:

31: ... on the first one there were some things that I want to do but there's a lot of things on there I didn't want to do, such as work with animals, , I don't know, I just can't see myself working with [animals].

She is seemingly unaware of the shift in her assumptions about her interests. It is beyond the scope of this project to investigate thoroughly how those assumptions developed. The experiential nature of the exercise, however, allowed her to transcend her own assumptions and to gain new insight into her interests. This information will likely be very useful to her in her pursuit of a satisfying career.

### *Requesting Information*

Requesting Information, a typical category, occurs in at least half of the studied sessions. In Session Four Participant #21 made her needs known in an information interview role-play, "Other than the teaching aspect, I want to know about the actual hands on business of forensic science." Requesting information differs from the type of

questioning that occurs in Clarification in that participants are requesting to have information introduced into the session rather than asking for more information on a previously introduced subject. These requests may indicate motivation, especially when they are career related.

### *Giving Information*

This is a general core idea and was present in every session. It refers to any new information other than an identity statement of “I am...” or “I am not...”. One example comes from Session One.

#32: They’re proofs and I get a free 16 x 20! if you get 10 portrait sheets you got a free 16 x 20! And I’m like ‘Woo Hoo’. Where am I going to put that though?

Facilitator #2: Oh yea, but that’s great!

#32: And I bought the frame too so they’re so hard to find, big ones like that.

Some of the information that gets shared in the sessions is not strictly related to career. Within the context of life on assistance, however, it can be seen as related to the strongly salient issue of how to survive on assistance; in this case, find deals and save money.

An example of career-related information that was shared in Session Two comes from #23 who responds to another participant’s report of a lost job opportunity by suggesting, “You should apply for one of those jobs they were advertising at [local manufacturing company]. I saw in the paper that they are paying seven dollars an hour”.

### *Isolated Noteworthy Events*

The typical domain entitled Isolated Noteworthy Events includes those less frequent interactions that highlighted deeply meaningful reactions. Isolated Noteworthy

Events focuses in on specific interactions between participants or between one or two participants and a facilitator that contained evidence of a deeper, more emotional engagement in the process.

There were six types of Isolated Noteworthy Events. They included Aggressive Confrontations, Facilitator-Participant Conflict, Lack Of Comprehension/ Unequal Ability Of Participants, Meaningful and Emotional Personal Revelations and Reconnecting. All of the types were variant with each occurring in less than half of the sessions except Meaningful and Emotional Personal Revelations, which was typical and occurred

#### *Meaningful and Emotional Personal Revelations*

This excerpt highlights a floating exercise in assertive communication that facilitators plug in where needed when they detect a need for it. That need is determined by the presence of highly aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive communication in session and an indication either in session or by history, that their communication style is impacting their relationships with others. This becomes important as they begin to communicate with the work world in search of satisfying employment. It is also potentially important for their relationships with the assisting agencies. Communication related relationship difficulties such as these could often be recognized more readily in a group setting.

During an assertiveness role-play, one chronically angry participant who had made several declarations within this and other sessions of her “attitude” by referring to herself as a bitch shares her vulnerability with unexpected emotional depth.



Facilitator #1: So, how did you feel when he blamed you. Can you use that “I feel” statement to tell, to pretend he is here and tell him how you felt when he blamed you?

21: I feel hurt when you blame me. I need you to understand it’s not my fault that you drink.

23: cool.

This participant had recently divorced her husband who was in jail on a drug or alcohol related charge. She was initially resistant to participating in this exercise but then was able to engage with the exercise deeply enough that she could express true feelings she had about her husband, feelings that she had not yet shared with him. This was the most often observed core idea of this domain.

The following three Isolated Noteworthy Events categories were variant, each occurring in only one session. They were all found within two sessions, Sessions Two and Four. Both sessions had the same facilitators, Facilitators One and Two, and had one particular participant in common, Participant #21.

#### *Aggressive Group Confrontation*

One aspect of the social support that can result from group participation is the powerful influence of social norms. One way that norms are expressed is through group confrontation of inappropriate communication or communication and behavior that is outside the norm. The optimum and hoped for style of confrontation in a group is through direct, assertive communication. In this excerpt from Session Two, #23 tries to confront the often aggressive and negative communication style of #21 through less than assertive means. She begins with passive aggressive commentary and eventually switches briefly

into a somewhat aggressive approach. This method, while effectively resulting in #21 lowering her tone, was not an optimum learning experience for either participant.

21: I said, "I don't tolerate those kinds of jokes. That's just the way I am."

23: Geesh.

Facilitator #2: So then you're doing a good job telling him how it is, at least you're not afraid to express your opinion.

21: Yea, that's why people call me a bitch. But I just think I'm blunt, like I'll tell you anything. Like if you ask me if you got a new haircut "does this look good?" "Hell no it doesn't." I'm not going to lie to you, You're the one that asked, why did you ask if you didn't want to hear it, ask somebody else, they'll tell you a lie.

23: I usually don't answer them. If it's that blunt and rude I'll say I don't know, ask somebody else. I mean I am blunt too, but I won't say, "No that looks bad." I'll say, "Ask her, ask a friend".

21: Yea, but if it's a friend

23: But, yea, if it was my friend, then oh yeah. If you showed up here and I said, "do you like my hair?" and you said "hell no". Then I'm like, "whoa".

21: No I'd say, something else looks better on you, like this and this, and I'd make suggestions, I would say a lie

Facilitator #1 At least nobody wonders how you feel, about things.

23: My sister says that too, she says, "you don't care whose feelings you hurt", she tells me that all the time. "You say what you've got to say."

21: Especially when it comes to men. I hate men. I'm like "whatever". I just say what ever I want, if I hurt your feelings, "oh, whatever, you'll find somebody else."

A few seconds later #21's cell phone rings:

21: Telephone! ... What the heck? (ringing), Hello, who is this? (gruffly) This is [#21], I'm in the middle of something so I can't talk to you right now!

23: Jesus!

Later in the session the conflict between #21 and #23 continues to develop:

21: I feel sorry for that little [kid]

23: I'm sorry I don't tolerate those kinds of jokes. That's just the way I am.

21: I don't care.

Facilitator #2: Thank you. Whoa.

A moment later as the facilitators continue with the exercise, the two conflicting participants, now quietly enough to not be overheard by the facilitators but within the range of the tape recorder, become a little more aggressive:

23: I'm givin' it back some now

21: somebody needs to go to the hospital, just kidding

23: it must be insulting to you

Participant #23, now obviously on the offensive, makes one more aggressive jab, to which #21 makes something of a passive responsive. Participant #23 has established herself as Top Dog in the group and has successfully placed #21 in a one-down position.

23: Listen to her. "The year is 2000 whatever"

21: Whatever year it is. I don't care.



One of the more therapeutic aspects of group therapy is the availability of feedback from fellow group members, even in the form of confrontation. Though Project HOPE sessions were primarily psychoeducational in structure the group format increased the availability of feedback that allowed for confrontations leading to change.

### *Facilitator/ Participant Conflict*

In these examples, the facilitators have apparently allowed their personal reactions to Participant #21's boasting about her callous attitude toward others interfere with their skills. They don't appear to be maintaining objectivity very well. In the first example Participant #21 becomes understandably defensive in response to the facilitator's sarcasm.

#21: Yea, I know. I'm nice at work. From eight to five I'm nice, but then after that I'm not....

Facilitator #1: What happens if it's 6 o'clock and you're still nice?....

21: I have my moments of being nice.

In this example Facilitator #2 has an equally subjective and likely ineffective personal reaction to participant #21.

Facilitator #1: We're going to do some "I" statements.

21: No we're not.

Facilitator #2: Oh, I think we will.

The role of facilitator in Project HOPE sessions constitutes a balancing act when it comes to maintaining therapeutic emotional distance. The design encourages facilitators to participate in exercises, thus sharing mildly personal information related mainly to coping, with the participants in order to reduce the emotional distance. The

hope is that facilitators and participants will develop a close enough relationship to lessen the threat of authority that recipients are accustomed to living within in relationships with social service agents. The goal, however, is to maintain enough emotional distance to provide a safe and mildly therapeutic environment. To avoid over connecting in the ways that are hinted at in these two excerpts, sessions were co-facilitated. The goal was that facilitators would offer feedback to one another and support one another through peer supervision to maintain a healthy balance.

### *Bonding Through Humor*

In the same session, following the conflict between #21, #23 and the facilitators, we see humor being used to reconnect. It is not apparent from the two dimensional representation here but the following exchanges were filled with good-natured laughter.

Facilitator #1: What does creativity mean to you, does it mean drawing pictures, cooking a nice meal, oh no wait a minute, I guess not.

21: it was a metaphor, [men] can cook for me, just kidding, at Hardee's or McDonald's

23: So will you starve to death?

21: I'll let men cook for me, It doesn't mean I'm with them.

23: She just pays them to do it, (laughter), no

21: because they like me so much

Facilitator #1: It's just she's so mean to them. They're trying so hard.

23: They're scared. She scares them.

Another instance shows the group supporting #21's ambitions through the use of good-natured teasing.

Facilitator #2: This girls going to be a CEO

21: I'm going to be at the very top. You can't go anywhere...I'm like "this is where it stops. You talk to me because there's nobody else to talk to. So if you got a problem, oh well, then if you don't want to talk to me , then there's no one else to talk to because everyone's going to come to me with their problems. I'm like, you talk to this person, but I'm the person ahead of them, so they're going to have to talk to me. And we'll just get rid of you then.

23: Oh geesh, she's using that authority now, ain't she, if you don't want to talk to me, then we'll get rid of you.

21: Yeah, but I'm kind of joking, it's my little bitch attitude coming out.

Facilitator #2: Ok

21: I'll have fun being at the very top wherever I am

Facilitator #1: Good, good for you

Although the content between this humorous example and the hostile example presented previously is very similar, the impact is very different given the context and the resolution of the apparent power struggle between #21 and #23. This illustrates how similar statements can communicate dramatically different messages to the participant.

#### *Lack of Comprehension/ Unequal Ability of Participants*

In this excerpt from Session Four we see that Participant #22 is having trouble with the concept behind the session task. The participants have in previous sessions identified particular jobs that might fit with their interests, values and skills. Outside of session they are going to make appointments to conduct information interviews with people working in the field they are interested in. In this session participants are trying to



decide, with facilitator coaching, what might be some of the questions they will want to ask when they call.

21: Career like a career transition program or what? So now I'd say, "This is [#21] and I'm participating in a career transition program. And I had a few questions I wanted to ask you."

Facilitator #1: Yep

Facilitator #2: How does that sound to you [#22]?

22: What I usually say is "Hi. This is [#22] I'm calling about the position you have open that I'm interested in."

Facilitator #2: Ok

Facilitator #1: Well, this, the idea of this is you're just calling for information, you're not really going to be applying for a job necessarily.

22: Oh, ok.

Facilitator #2: Your going to be finding out if that job is something that you might like to pursue in the future. Does that make sense?

Facilitator #1: Well, we're going to talk about questions that you can ask them.

What kind of questions do you think you want to know, now if you call about a computer-programming job, something to do with computers. You were talking about [Company Name] before and some other place [Company Name], [Company Name] and [Company Name]. Ok, if your going to call one of those places what kind of questions would you want to know about that job?

22: Umm, what do you do there and stuff.

Facilitator #1: What do you do at work?

22: Yea, what do you do there and stuff.

Facilitator #1: So that's something you could ask them

22: And uh, what kind of jobs do you have?

Participant #22 is operating more concretely than Participant #21. The preceding excerpt is only a few moments of the large amount of session time that was devoted to helping her to understand the task. She did not get beyond the concept of applying for a job.

Careful screening for cognitive ability and proper grouping of participants is necessary to avoid this type of mismatch in abilities and the impact it has on the session flow. We did note that #21 was very supportive of #23 and tried several ways to help her to make good use of the exercise.

### *Negative Impact*

The dynamics within the group setting also appeared to have offered some negative impacts. These have been included within the domain titled Negative Impact. Two categories included those impacts that resulted from group involvement and those that occurred as a result of participants' interactions with facilitators or facilitators' interactions with one another. This domain is general, occurring in some form in every session.

### *Negative Impact from Group*

This was a variant category, occurring in less than half of the sessions. In Session Four, confidentiality had not been protected by all of the group participants, which resulted in a misunderstanding regarding one participant's group attendance, mandatory for one facet of her assistance.

Facilitator #1: I wonder if we could give [# 22] an opportunity to share her experience. How you're feeling about this [# 22].

22: About what, the group?

Facilitator #1: Yeah, about the, about, you know, this, the fact that, the fact that Job Service, you know, that....

22: Oh yea, because I was a little upset about it. You know, that's one thing I don't like. You know, I don't want to get on assistance; it's only the job. I don't care about assistance. And I want to get a job, I mean, but, when she called me up and told me that [a group member told Job Service] that I wasn't participating, I didn't like that. 'Cause you know, I shouldn't have to, when I go every week I shouldn't have to have somebody lying and saying I'm not going.

It is evident that this type of negative experience, with its potential for long-term implications for trust within the group, would not have come about in traditional career counseling. The presence of other group members extends the risk for a violation of confidentiality beyond that of a traditional individual career counseling setting. There is also an added risk of sanctions to a recipient's benefits that might result from false information about attendance to mandated sessions. There was, however, a more global benefit to this conflict. Participant #22 was able to experience her own assertiveness and her ability to successfully navigate conflict.

In this excerpt from Session Six, Participant #62 shares mild frustration with the lack of usefulness of the 'When I am 40...' task.

Facilitator #3: How did it go?



62: It was difficult to think about things you don't normally think about on a daily basis

Facilitator #2: Ok. Was it useful to think about them?

62: No, because it's stuff that I've thought about before and already planned out and locked away.

Participants' frustration with the lack of immediate practical applicability of the session tasks was reflected on the SIS ratings wherein Question #5: Progress toward knowing what to do about barriers, was the lowest rated SIS item in the Helpful Impacts Index.

Though they made more use of the access to a peer group to engage in sharing, role-plays and discussion of barriers than for the more practical pursuit of career goals, participants' SIS scores reflect what might amount to a mismatch between their expectations for the sessions and the reality of the experiential design. It may also reflect misinformation given to them by the social assistance caseworkers that referred them to the group.

### *Negative Impact from Facilitators*

In Session Three we see the negative impact of several moments' lapse in leadership as an exchange of passive-aggressive comments between facilitators overrides the participant focus. In this long excerpt the members of the group, facilitators and participants, are charged with working as a team to resolve a dilemma wherein they are to determine the relative value of various professions to the survival of humanity. At one point the session becomes disjointed as if each person is operating independently. Almost as if in the background we hear the participants attempting to remain neutral and continue

with the task at hand despite the apparent conflict that is occurring between the facilitators. The buildup to the actual conflict took about five minutes of the tape. Below are the highlights showing the disconnect between facilitators and participants and between facilitators and the session task.

Facilitator #2: You know, I really feel shook, when you yell at me Facilitator #3.

Facilitator #3: Because?

Facilitator #2: Because, just because.

10 Who's talking to who? About what?

Facilitator #2: But, Facilitator #3 I was thinking, was thinking if you went you could act the police person, cause you're a big guy. You could do that. You could go.

Facilitator #3: I could be a mental health worker and a policeman.

Facilitator #2: (Sarcastically) Aren't you Mr. Special.

10: They were throwing beer bottles at the police, so you kind of wonder you might need more than one to keep...

Facilitator #2 Well, if I go, if I do, I could be, I could be something.

32: So do we count all of ourselves on here? Because if we count everybody on there...

Facilitator #2: That's what we were thinking we could take different roles, maybe.

Facilitator #3: Yea, and then I could help Facilitator #2 keep order, cause I would imagine. I think I have inflated you as a scientist. A scientist will be the electrician; the scientist will be the computer programmer, the scientist...

Facilitator #2: Ok, what ever turns you on Facilitator #3

Facilitator #3: I'll stop talking

10: [We] have more people than anything, four more people... (Interchange continued to develop for 2 minutes)...

Facilitator #2: Well, I could be a farmer, carpenter.

10: Yea, (mild laughter) if you want two carpenters.

Facilitator #2: You don't think so? Don't roll your eyes at me dear. (Angry tone)

Facilitator #3: I'd be impressed if you could handle one of them. (Angry tone)

32: If we...

Facilitator #2 (interrupts): You don't think I could? (Angry)

#32: ...wanted a carpenter.

Facilitator #2: Just because I don't know how to drive a tractor, doesn't mean I can't learn. I shoveled a lot of shit in my day. (Angry)

Facilitator #3: I'm sure you did. (Angry)

Facilitator #2: And I have. (Angry)

Facilitator #3: And you still do. (Angry)

Facilitator #2: Yea, but it's not literal. I have a horse you know. (Mildly angry)

Facilitator #3: That's true, you do. (Mildly angry)

Facilitator #2: I've changed diapers. (Mildly angry)

10: If we want two carpenters we're up to fifteen. If you want one we still need...

The facilitators in this excerpt began their exchange in a light tone. By the time the excerpt ended their tone had clearly shifted to anger. The participant's voices grew stronger and more insistent as they attempted to pull the facilitators' attention back to the task. It is interesting to note that the participants attempted to regain control of the



situation by interrupting and attempting to model focused behavior for the facilitators.

The conflict between the facilitators took the upper hand.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This work emerged from my interest in providing alternative approaches to career counseling for vocationally-stalled individuals making the transition into, or returning to, work. The individuals I had previously worked with in career counseling, those receiving social assistance and having difficulty planning forward, did not appear to make very good use of traditional career counseling methods. Discovering that there was limited discussion within the career counseling field about potential missing components to traditional career counseling that made it less than effective for this population my intention was to develop an understanding of intervention components would provide a more effective and respectful way to help these folks transition.

I was fortunate to have an opportunity to participate in the development of Project HOPE, a grant-funded group approach to career exploration with vocationally stalled adults, many of whom were facing a mandated transition from public assistance to self-sufficiency. The project included elements of experiential, humanistic, and interpersonal counseling methods and concepts to deliver the meat of career counseling. I believe that these elements are necessary for successful career counseling with this population.

#### Domains and Categories

Each of the domains was seen in all of the sessions that were analyzed for this study with the exception of Noteworthy Isolated Events, which was seen in at least half

of the sessions. The categories within those domains were determined by team consensus to have exhausted our understanding of the content. Some of the categories occurred more frequently than others. Some of them seemed to provide more understanding of the characteristics of the interactions than did others. Overall, I believe the domains and categories provide a thorough analysis of the in-the-moment processes that occurred within these six sessions of an experiential group-based approach to career counseling with this population.

### *Affiliation*

This domain showed us the processes involved in cohesion building between participants and highlighted relationship factors necessary for trust that may increase the potential for growth and change.

### *Common Ground*

Common Ground indicated instances of bonding through the sharing of familiar experiences culminating in a shared group identification of “we are...” or “we are not...” stated or implied.

The group-level sharing of current vocational situation may have served to normalize and validate individual situations, possibly reducing feelings of isolation. It may have also helped them to feel less alone in their situations, helping them to experience a change in their self-image as a result of discovering that they share common ground with other participants.

### *Affirmation*

Affirmation by the participants that facilitators were hearing them correctly may have indicated that facilitators were employing accurate empathy. One of the tools of



empathy that facilitators employed was reframing. Another was to share validating personal reactions. It helped participants to reframe the problem they were attempting to solve. Where they had previously seen themselves and their lack of ability as the problem, they may begin to realize that theirs is a truly difficult situation that even the most capable people would struggle with. They may see that they have accomplished a great deal by dealing with a difficult problem and hopefully re-experience themselves as capable.

Assistance recipients trying to make this necessary transition often do not feel heard or understood by social service agents. If the facilitator is able to validate the participant's feelings of stress and her experience of the real difficulty of living on assistance while trying to transition into the workforce it may allow her to openly share the fears and doubts she is experiencing

### *Clarification*

Clarification can indicate interest in or engagement with the task or subject matter. For instance, a request for clarification may be a sign that the participant knows that they do not have enough information. The net effect of engagement at a level that allows for a metacognitive analysis may be an increase in the potential for learning to take place.

### *Support*

Participants experienced support both from facilitators and from fellow participants. The availability of the experience of being supported for this population may itself be a corrective emotional experience. Assistance recipients encounter a lot of

criticism and scrutiny in all walks of life. They more often feel scolded and shamed, especially by the system's representatives.

### *Storytelling*

The more tangential the content of the storytelling, the higher the likelihood that it reflected a persistent deficit in the effective communication skills that are often necessary for success in the workplace. In addition to being hard to be around in the workplace, assistance recipients with weak personal boundaries leave them unprotected and unnecessarily vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. Less tangential storytelling appears to have increased cohesion in the group as participants came to know one another more intimately. This level of sharing gave the group sessions a less rigid, less task oriented feel and allowed for the introduction of humor, sadness, fear and joy.

### *Identity Statement*

When participants make candid statements about their personal identity, it can offer facilitators information about the participant's self-image, and for the purposes of a career transition group, their self-efficacy. It can offer indications of hopelessness and give the facilitators information about how to formulate interactions and exercises with participants to offer them opportunities for change.

### *Barriers*

In the domain of Barriers we saw those intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers that exist in addition to the common barriers to vocational satisfaction encountered by others and effectively addressed through other career counseling theories and methods. These extra barriers come from many sources that are inherent in the role of a

vocationally stalled individual. Participants in this study both displayed and relayed knowledge of barriers to satisfying employment they are facing or have faced in the past.

These included internal and external barriers such as lacking vocationally related self-knowledge, knowledge of the work world and opportunities, physical problems, low self-efficacy, and self-deprecating thoughts and behaviors, unchallenging work, parenting issues, communication issues, financial problems, etc.

#### *In-Session Internal*

In session internal barriers were seen in this study in the form of barriers to thinking in new ways and/or questioning behaviors. Experiencing themselves in a new way, as in the experiential exercises in these sessions may allow, may help participants to open up their thinking to encourage new, creative solutions to career problems.

#### *Out-of-Session External*

These external barriers are the day-to-day challenges that recipients encounter such as childcare issues, transportation, even sleeping on less than adequate bedding, making parenting and working even more of a challenge. They are the problems that recipients recognize that non-recipients do not appear to struggle with as often and appear to have the resources to avoid.

The freedom to share their struggles with these barriers with one another and with the facilitators without implied or expressed judgment of them as ungrateful may allow for a corrective emotional experience that may or may not be available in traditional career counseling. In a group of their peers, however, they are likely to hear empathy and or suggestions for how to deal with the various barriers. At the very least, talking about



these barriers with others who understand the struggle might help to reduce the stress they feel.

#### *In-Session External*

Various distracters are common in any group setting, including this one. Participants in these sessions needed to bring their children with them to make participation more convenient and less expensive than trying to arrange for childcare. This necessity was anticipated and an attempt to accommodate for the need was included in the design of project HOPE in the form of a children's version of the career exploration group. Nevertheless, children were occasionally in need of their parent's attention and were allowed to interrupt the adult session if necessary. The participants frequently prioritized their children's needs over the demands of participation.

#### *Out-of-Session Internal*

These barriers were reported in session and largely consisted of communication issues, struggles with motivation, relationship issues and parenting issues. The in-session exercises may have impacted these barriers in that participants were encouraged to problem solve using these out of session internal barriers as examples and to practice new skills outside of session.

### *New Knowledge*

#### *New Insight*

The group format within the sessions and the psychoeducational nature of the tasks allowed for the effective insertion of assertiveness training at unplanned points in any session. The learning that was achieved in the assertiveness role-plays and training was subsequently reinforced through modeling and occasional labeling of both effective

and ineffective responses in assertiveness training terms. Participants who attended regularly demonstrated strong improvements in their communication styles and use of assertiveness both in and, by report, out of session. Though the participants appeared to feel awkward in the role-plays at times, the benefit of the experiential learning made the exercise worthwhile.

### *Requesting Information*

Participants requested various types of information, some of which was personal information about facilitators. Occasionally participants asked for career related information. It is not surprising that they did not do this regularly as they may not have had enough information, at least in the beginning stages of the group, to formulate these questions.

### *Giving Information*

Though much of the information that participants shared in the sessions was not strictly related to career, within the context of life on assistance it can be seen as related to the strongly salient issue of how to survive on assistance. Participants shared ideas about how to save money, where to look for jobs, who was providing low cost childcare, who were the most supportive social service workers, as well as these least supportive and other tips on day-to-day survival on assistance. This seemed to be an important part of bonding as well as a useful tool for gaining information.

A particular strength of the group format of Project HOPE is its ability to bring together resilient people who have learned a lot about how to live on very little and to appreciate what they do have access to and give them the opportunity to share information with one another.

### *Isolated Noteworthy Events*

The domain entitled Isolated Noteworthy Events included those less frequent interactions that signaled deeply meaningful reactions. They focused in on specific interactions that contained evidence of a deeper, more emotional engagement in the process.

#### *Meaningful and Emotional Personal Revelations*

This was the most often-observed core idea of this domain. The participants were able to engage with the exercise deeply enough that they could express deep feelings that they may or may not have previously recognized or expressed. Often observable signs of emotion such as tears or strong affect and reports of emotion accompanied these revelations.

#### *Aggressive Group Confrontation*

One of the more therapeutic aspects of group therapy is the availability of feedback from fellow group members, even in the form of confrontation. Though Project HOPE sessions were primarily psychoeducational in structure the group format increased the availability of feedback that allowed for confrontations that may lead to change.

#### *Facilitator/ Participant Conflict*

The role of facilitator in Project HOPE sessions constitutes a balancing act when it comes to maintaining therapeutic emotional distance. The design encourages facilitators to participate in exercises, thus sharing mildly personal information related mainly to coping, with the participants in order to reduce the emotional distance. The hope is that facilitators and participants will develop a close enough relationship to lessen the threat of authority that recipients are accustomed to living within in relationships with



social service agents. The goal, however, is to maintain enough emotional distance to provide a safe and mildly therapeutic environment. To avoid over connecting in ways that interfere with them maintaining therapeutic objectivity. The goal was that facilitators would offer feedback to one another and support one another through peer supervision to maintain a healthy balance.

### *Bonding Through Humor*

Following an aggressive participant-to-participant confrontation, the participants involved used humor to restore the balance in their relationship and to bond.

### *Lack of Comprehension/ Unequal Ability of Participants*

When one participant is operating more concretely than another a large amount of session time must be devoted to helping the lower ability participant to make use of the exercises. Careful screening for cognitive ability and proper grouping of participants is necessary to avoid this type of mismatch in abilities and the impact it has on the session flow.

### *Negative Impact*

The dynamics within the group setting also appeared to have offered some negative impacts. These have been included within the domain titled Negative Impact. Two categories included those impacts that resulted from group involvement and those that occurred as a result of participants' interactions with facilitators or facilitators' interactions with one another.

### *Negative Impact from Group*

Confidentiality is difficult to guarantee in a group setting and had not been protected by all of the group participants. This resulted in a misunderstanding regarding one participant's group attendance, mandatory for one facet of her assistance.

It is evident that this type of negative experience, with its potential for long-term implications for trust within the group, would not have come about in traditional career counseling. The presence of other group members extends the risk for a violation of confidentiality beyond that of a traditional individual career counseling setting. There is also an added risk of sanctions to a recipient's benefits that might result from false information about attendance to mandated sessions.

Another negative impact, participants' frustration with the lack of immediate practical applicability of the session tasks, was reflected on the SIS ratings wherein Question #5: Progress toward knowing what to do about barriers, was the lowest rated SIS item in the Helpful Impacts Index. There may have been a mismatch between participants' expectations for the sessions and the reality of the experiential design. It may also reflect misinformation given to them by the social assistance caseworkers that referred them to the group.

### *Negative Impact from Facilitators*

In Session Three we see the negative impact of several moments' lapse in leadership as an exchange of passive-aggressive comments between facilitators overrides the participant focus. In this long excerpt the members of the group, facilitators and participants, are charged with working as a team to resolve a dilemma wherein they are to determine the relative value of various professions to the survival of humanity. At one

point the session becomes disjointed as if each person is operating independently. Almost as if in the background we hear the participants attempting to remain neutral and continue with the task at hand despite the apparent conflict that is occurring between the facilitators. The buildup to the actual conflict took about five minutes of the tape. Below are the highlights showing the disconnect between facilitators and participants and between facilitators and the session task.

The facilitators in this excerpt began their exchange in a light tone. By the time the excerpt ended their tone had clearly shifted to anger. The participant's voices grew stronger and more insistent as they attempted to pull the facilitators' attention back to the task. It is interesting to note that the participants attempted to regain control of the situation by interrupting and attempting to model focused behavior for the facilitators. The conflict between the facilitators took the upper hand.

#### Interpretation of the Results

One of the original intents of the development of Project HOPE was to find a format in which to provide participants with a somewhat more client-centered approach to career counseling, a format that encourages facilitators to be more responsive to participants' immediate needs. The design allowed facilitators to depart from a more structured career agenda and to be more spontaneous in their presentation as they alternate between assessment and psychoeducation.

Although this format is a strength and a unique aspect of the program, it also proved to be an unfortunate weakness in some circumstances. This was particularly the case when you consider the relative emphasis on career information versus personal interactions. Participants who came bringing both social skills needs and career-related



needs often attended more to the social nature of the sessions than to the availability of career information. Facilitators were sensitive to the participants' preferences for attending to cohesion, relationship issues and assertiveness, all of which are important skill sets and necessary for the pursuit and maintenance of satisfying employment. They are, however, less directly applicable to choosing and preparing for a specific career path. It is worth noting that this is also reflected in ratings on the SIS scale (as reported in the Methods chapter).

Direct requests for career-related information occurred rarely. This should not have been surprising as most participants are likely lacking adequate career-related information, self-knowledge and/or the social skills necessary to recognize the need for the information or to formulate the questions. This lack of focus on specific career information did not address the barrier of lack of knowledge. Nonetheless the focus on emotional growth areas, communication skills and social skills is important for the potential success of this population. Without this focus the likelihood of successful transitions that lead to satisfying employment are seriously diminished.

As indicated by the results of this qualitative study, participants responded to this experiential approach in ways that highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention. In the following discussion, I will summarize my interpretation of the findings and compare and contrast these findings to existing literature, describe the limitations of the study, and discuss the implications of this work for practice, training, and future research.

### *Strengths and Positive Impacts*

I learned from the interactions that occurred within these six sessions of a group-based experiential approach to career exploration that participants were able to accomplish not only change that is directly related to the pursuit of employment but also change that is supportive of the goal of obtaining satisfying employment. Changes in self-identity, self-efficacy, future goals, communication skills, as well as changes in attitude regarding professionals, counseling and the work world were observed. For example, those who had previously felt it necessary to define themselves in less than effective terms such as “bitch” in order to garner the stronger sense of self that it afforded them were able to experience the strength of a new self-identity as assertive.

Assistance recipients see themselves as ineffective or without power to direct or control their own circumstances. Participants in this program were able to experience themselves as problem solvers and decision makers. They began to think of themselves as able rather than helpless. Specifically, participants who had previously felt helpless to form concrete career goals for themselves were able to first imagine, then form and finally plan their pursuit of goals for a satisfying career. Project HOPE exercises enlivened the goal formation process by incorporating the participants' needs and preferences.

Another common barrier to satisfying employment in this population is the effective use of communication. They do not appear to be skilled at directly expressing their feelings, reactions and needs. I had experienced their communication styles as passive, aggressive and passive aggressive, but rarely assertive. I had anticipated that we would be directly and indirectly working to improve communication throughout all of the



sessions. I also believe that the experience of communicating assertively can facilitate changes in self-perception, empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Welfare recipients need effective counseling strategies to overcome intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers that affect employability and career development (McDonald, 2002). Lent (2001) suggests an approach to career exploration with transitioning assistance recipients that offers respect, open communication, empathy and genuineness in the therapeutic relationship to foster effective interventions and facilitate learning and development. Lent further asserts that these more humanistic counseling properties can be effectively applied in welfare-to-work groups.

Recipients' dependent relationships with assistance professionals are often full of invasive expectations, regulations, requirements and sanctions that can leave them feeling less than, impotent, sometimes defensive and even angry. It is reasonable for them to assume that the professionals providing mandated career counseling sessions are going to be as unyielding and directive and, in essence, forcing less than satisfying career solutions on them.

Project HOPE's more egalitarian approach to career counseling helped to resolve some of the defensiveness and frustration that the participants approached the task with, especially for those recipients who attended many or all of the sessions. Reports from their case managers in assistance agencies confirmed changes in attitude toward the agency professionals to increased cooperation and ownership.

Many welfare recipients have difficulty thinking of work in terms of satisfaction. Their lives are so tightly focused on material needs that they focus on the end result and not on the process of work. They are initially unable to see the connection between the



stuff of traditional career counseling such as interests, skills, and values, and their material needs.

One Project HOPE participant came stating:

# 61 I would like to live in a better apartment, I'd like to drive a better car.... I need a new Mustang, I'll do what ever it takes to get one.

Later, after effective career exploration, his focus changed:

# 61 I don't really figure the money as being reward. I see it more as being a crutch. I hate money, I really do, but working with... with my hands and everything. Probably [using] tools... anything that has to do with building things.

In spite of the more humanistic aspects of the approach, the most salient features for many participants are the experiential learning tools. For example:

#21: Like they ask me, in general they want to know what Project HOPE is all about. I tell them, well it's like educational things, they go through barriers, we do these things, we do these projects....

As previously discussed in the literature, experiential learning brings about a relatively permanent change in knowledge or understanding directly related to the experience. Through doing, critically reflecting, and gaining insight, the new knowledge or understanding becomes integrated into the existing knowledge base (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). This is basic assimilation and accommodation. The more personally relevant the experience the higher the likelihood that change will occur (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Through new experience, ownership of the new knowledge occurs. If they can feel themselves doing it, they can believe in it and in themselves.

### *Negative Impacts*

In addition to the more positive changes, we also discovered a few negative impacts. A few session tasks were too difficult for some participants. This may have left them feeling like they had failed and served to further decrease self-efficacy.

Agents of assistance agencies, in an effort to gain needed information about recipients' participation would occasionally encourage participants to provide information about other group members. By doing this they unintentionally placed participants in a difficult dilemma; give my worker what she wants or honor group confidentiality.

To facilitate rapport and trust building, and to model effective problem solving, facilitators often participated in the exercises with the participants. The delicate balance that facilitators had to maintain between their roles as authority figures, teachers, therapists and students, in at least one case seems to have been lost as two of them allowed themselves to act out a minor student-to-student conflict to the detriment of the session task. All of these negative impacts might have been avoided through improved participant screening and facilitator training.

### *Limitations*

One of the limitations to a study of this nature is the limited number of participants. A sample of this size is adequate for an in-depth CQR exploration of the change processes involved in an experiential career exploration group with transitioning assistance recipients. However, the number of participants in the sample is small and thus the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or to transitioning assistance recipients in general. This points to the need to replicate studies of this nature in other

population subsets so that our understanding of assistance recipients' career counseling needs can be broadened to include recipients of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The results of this study rely on excerpts from a sampling of sessions that may or may not be representative of all of the project's sessions. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from these excerpts are not necessarily representative of all the participants of the project. The participants in this study are not necessarily representative of all assistance recipients or vocationally stalled individuals, therefore the results of this study may not be generalizable to all members of the population.

Though not a limitation, one challenge of this type of study is the extensive time required for the coding and analysis of the data, especially the time required of the outside readers. This significant contribution of time and effort increases the confirmability and dependability of the findings, and provides greater credibility to the results of the study.

## Implications

### *Practice*

This study has implications for practitioners of career counseling who work with transitioning assistance recipients and vocationally stalled adults. It is important to acknowledge that internalization of cultural messages about socioeconomic status and assistance recipients diminish self-efficacy, and self-image, and increase constrained thinking in potential workers. I also do not feel that transitioning assistance recipients should be pathologized for exhibiting the effects of the same cultural impositions. Rather, the reality of these cultural beliefs should be discussed openly with members of the



population. Efforts need to be directed toward facilitating self-exploration, self-acceptance and the development of self-efficacy through the emotional re-experiencing of the self. Further, assistance recipients need to be invited to feel a part of rather than apart from the rest of society before they can begin to consider what contributions they can and will make to that society through a satisfying and therefore fruitful career.

I believe that in order to effectively achieve this goal, career counseling needs to include elements of group process for support, validation and communication. It is necessary to provide an safe and accepting atmosphere where clients can be encouraged to try things that are outside their comfort zone, things that they are unlikely to try on their own.

### *Training*

The results of this study imply that employees of federal, state and local assistance agencies who work directly with vocationally stalled individuals need to be provided training that improves their understanding of not only the economic barriers recipients face in transitioning from assistance and unemployment to independence and satisfying employment. They could further benefit from increased understanding of the processes involved in change.

The findings of this study also indicate that a relationship based on mutual trust and respect can provide important experiences that improve self-efficacy. Explicit training in the emotional aspects of receiving assistance can increase awareness of the impact of social stereotypes and increase assistance providers' self-awareness of their contributions to those stereotypes. It can help providers build relationships with recipients that allow recipients to feel safe enough of be honest with the providers. This in turn

would increase opportunities for providers to positively impact recipients' progress, which might increase the potential for more successful transitions.

### *Research*

Further research needs to be conducted in this area using both qualitative and quantitative designs and larger numbers of participants to improve the generalizability of the results. It would also be important to determine whether group size, focus of content, and participant factors (such as previous education, work history and length of time on welfare) might impact the response to an experiential career group.

Further study of the differences in rate of and type of change between mandated recipients and self-referred recipients needs to occur. A large portion of this study's participants were mandated either overtly or covertly. This may be reflective of the portions of mandated and self-referred participants in any assistance transition programming.

It might also be important to explore the changes possible in a series of individual experiential career counseling sessions. A comparison needs to be made between individual and group-based experiential career counseling to determine the differing effects of the group format and the experiential format.

Research needs to be conducted to discover differences in ability to make effective use of experiential, client-centered, or emotion-based group career counseling format by participants of differing education levels.

### *Conclusion*

This study has provided much-needed information about the experience of vocationally-stalled adults making the transition from welfare to work. This information

can be placed into two broad categories: First, how the participants interacted in and made use of the experiential career groups, and second, the needs that were and were not addressed by the group experience. Specifically, these findings suggest that a more client-centered, experiential group-based approach to career counseling with vocationally stalled adults can help to improve communication skills and provide the corrective emotional experiences that promote the personal growth necessary to prepare them for a satisfying career. However, while this approach surpasses traditional career counseling in its attention to these more emotion-based skills, it is perhaps less effective in preparing them for immediate employment or in helping them to form concrete career plans.

Though the experiential groups examined in this study fall short of providing immediately applicable practical job skills, they appeared to add a necessary dimension to career preparation work with this population. The findings can serve to direct future formation of career exploration groups for transitioning welfare recipients and other vocationally stalled adults. They can also inform the training of social service providers to help them to better address the emotional needs of their clients.



## APPENDIX A

### Consent Form

My name is Rhandi Clow. I am a graduate student in the Department of Counseling at the University of North Dakota. You are invited to participate in a study that evaluates the experiential activities that are used in Project HOPE. Your decision whether or not to participate will not change your future relations with Project HOPE. You can participate in Project HOPE whether or not you consent to participate in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without it being held against you. This study is being supervised by Cindy Juntunen, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling.

For the proposed study, the Project HOPE sessions will be audiotaped. You will be asked to state aloud a number assigned to you for this research and read aloud a short passage. This will be audiotaped as vocal identification. You will be asked to refrain from stating any identifying information such as your name, a precaution that protects your privacy. This procedure will take approximately 3 minutes.

The major risk associated with this study is confidentiality. In order to minimize any risk to confidentiality, the tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in my office for a period of three years, and will then be de-magnetized and destroyed. In addition, all names will be edited out of the tapes, so that individuals cannot be connected to the results of the study. Finally, all information gathered in this study will be reported in group form only, so that no individual can be identified.

You may benefit from this study because it may help you become more aware of the impact that the activities used in HOPE are having on the barriers to your career satisfaction. You may also benefit by knowing that helping with the research may benefit others with similar barriers. The benefits of the research to society involve adding to the information about the impact of experiential activities, providing support for the use of experiential methods in career exploration, and providing outcome information to improve services to people seeking more satisfying work experiences.

A team of three counseling and counseling psychology student researchers who are not directly involved with the project will analyze the audiotapes. If you decide not to participate in this study we will not analyze audiotaped discussion directly involving you.

The investigators involved in this study are available to answer any questions you have concerning this program. In addition, you are encouraged to ask any questions concerning this program that you may have in the future. Questions may be asked by calling Rhandi Clow at 777-4336 or Dr. Cindy Juntunen at 777-3740.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to take with you. I understand what I have read, all of my questions have been answered and i am encouraged to ask any questions that I may have concerning this study in the future.

I have read all of the above and willingly agree to participate in this study explained to me by

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Participant's signature

Date

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